

Factsheet – Young people, drugs and alcohol: the Irish situation



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Introduction

This factsheet includes key Irish research on young people up to the age of 24, and will be updated as new data is published. The studies cited may report on different age groups and these are noted in the text.

Key research on drug use in young people in Ireland

There are numerous studies that include information on drug use in young people; for prevalence data we have chosen the four sources below.

HBSC- Health Behaviour in School age Children^{1, 2}

In 2018, Ireland participated for the sixth time in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children¹ [HBSC](#) study¹. The survey included 15,557 school-children from 8 to 18 years old; 255 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated. Among other health indicators, data were collected on smoking and the use of alcohol and other substances.

ESPAD- European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs³

The seventh European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs³ [ESPAD](#) survey was undertaken in 39 European countries during 2019 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland, 1,949 questionnaires were completed by young people who were born in 2003 from 50 randomly selected post-primary schools.

GUI- Growing up in Ireland study⁴

[Growing Up in Ireland](#) is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland.⁴ The study follows the progress of two cohorts: Cohort '98 (the 'Child Cohort') who were aged 9 years at first interview in 2007 and Cohort '08 (the Infant Cohort) who were just 9 months in the first wave in 2008.

Most recently, Growing up in Ireland has presented summary information on the lives and circumstances of the 20-year-olds from the fourth wave of 5,191 interviews with the Child Cohort '98 between August 2018 and June 2019.⁵

GPS- General population survey⁶

Every four years the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) commission a survey of the general population to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use drugs and alcohol.⁵ There have been four surveys to date. Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+^a normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as prisoners or hostel dwellers).

All illicit drugs

A number of these surveys ask young people about their use of illicit drugs. Table 1 provides trends in drug use by young people over the four general population surveys (GPS).⁶

^a In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years.

Table 1 Illicit drug use by 15-24-year-olds, by year (%), GPS

	2002 /3	2006/7	2010/11	2014/15
Any illegal drug	12.7	15.4	15.1	18.7
Cannabis	11.0	13.1	12.9	16.2
Ecstasy	2.8	2.8	1.1	6.7
Cocaine	2.7	3.8	2.5	3.2
Poppers	0.9	1.2	0.2	2.1
M Mushrooms	1.1	1.9	1.0	1.6
Amphetamines	1.2	0.8	1.5	0.5
LSD	0.2	0.2	0.9	0.8
Methadone	0.2	0	0.3	0.4
Heroin	0.2	0	0.3	0.1
Crack	0.1	0.4	0	0.5
Solvents	0.2	0.0	0.6	0.5

Figure 1 shows illicit drug use for young people compared to all ages in the most recent GPS 2014/15. Use of any illegal drug in the last year is highest amongst the 15-to-24 age group (18.7%).⁶

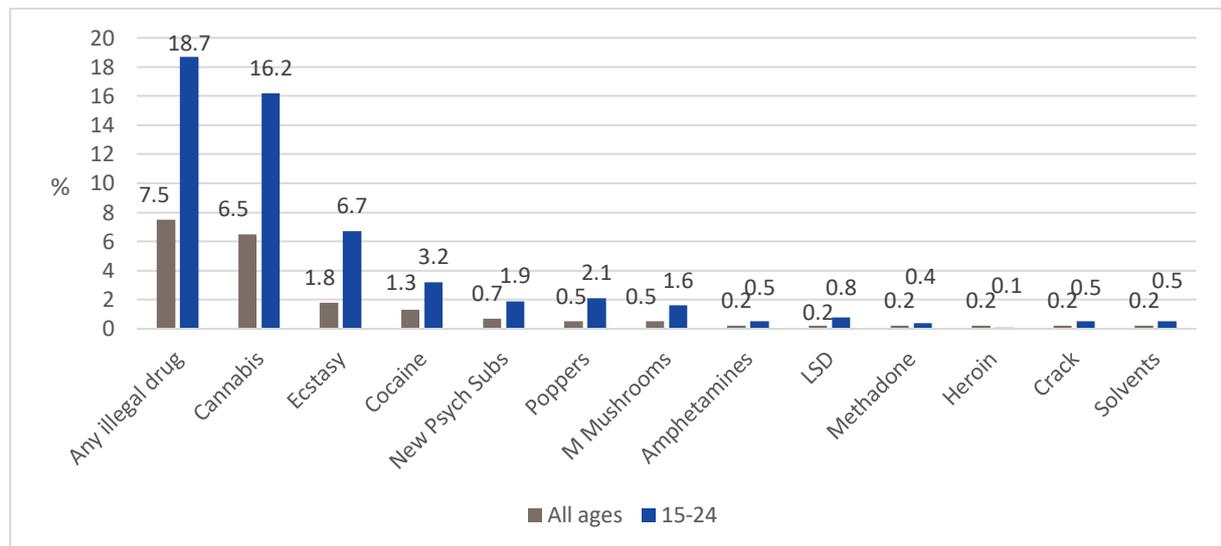


Figure 1: Percentage of those reporting illegal drug use in the last year by age, 2014/15, GPS

Cannabis

How many young people use cannabis in the Republic of Ireland?

The 2014/15 the GPS involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland).⁶ The results for Ireland for those aged 15 to 24 showed that:

- Cannabis use has increased from 11% in 2002/3 to 16.2% in 2014/15 (Table 1)
- Those aged 15 to 24 are the most likely to have used cannabis in the last year (16.2%) (Figure 1).
- Use among males of this age (25.4%) is considerably higher than females of the same age (12%).

In the most recent 2018 HBSC study, based on children aged 10 to 17, 8% of boys and 6% of girls report cannabis use in the last 12 months. Boys and older children are more likely to report cannabis use in the last 12 months.¹

Between 1998 and 2018 there was a small decrease in the percentage of girls who reported cannabis use in the last 12 months, and a moderate decrease for boys. The decrease is most evident among younger children and children in higher social class groups.²

The 2019 ESPAD study of 15-16-year-old students also asked how many times in their lives they had used cannabis. Male students (23.8%) were more likely than females (14.7%) to have ever tried cannabis. Overall, 19.1% of students had ever tried cannabis, of these most had tried it once or twice. There was also a sizeable minority of students who had smoked cannabis 20 times or more (4.1%).³

In the latest Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, (70%) of 17/18-year-olds reported that they had never used cannabis³. Nearly one-third (30%) of the 17/18-year-olds reported having tried cannabis, with between 2% and 4% having tried each of ecstasy, cocaine, painkillers and aerosols/glue. Almost 10% stated that they currently smoked cannabis occasionally or more than once per week.

Also, a key findings report from the GUI study⁵ presents findings on the lives of 20-year-olds, and shows:

- 59% of all 20-year-olds reported that they had 'ever tried cannabis'
- 26% said they had tried cannabis once or twice
- 18% said that they took it occasionally
- 6% took it more than once a week
- 9% don't take cannabis anymore
- 13% reported that they had tried 'ecstasy, cocaine etc.' less than 5 times
- 9% of all young adults had used 'prescription drugs for "recreational" use'.

Alcohol

Alcohol use by young people

In the most recent HBSC survey¹ 73% of respondents had tried alcohol and 41% were current users (had used alcohol in the previous 30 days), while 16% reported having been drunk in the previous 30 days. Increased alcohol use was associated with lower parental education levels and lower parental monitoring, as well as with truancy, lower school grades, and peer alcohol use. The reasons given most frequently for using alcohol were to make social gatherings more fun (49%) and to help respondents "to enjoy a party" (48%).

Between 1998 and 2018 there was a moderate decrease in the percentage of girls who reported having ever been drunk, and there was a large decrease for boys.²

Between 2002 and 2018 there was a large decrease in the percentage of 15-17-year-old girls and boys who reported that they were 13 or younger when they had their first alcoholic drink. The decrease is evident across all social class groups.²

How many young people receive treatment for alcohol and drug use?

The National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.

Unpublished data from the NDTRS shows that in 2019, 107 (1.4%) cases aged under 18 were in treatment for alcohol as a main problem drug. This has decreased from 220 (2.8%) in 2013.

107 cases entered alcohol treatment under the age of 18 in 2019^b.

Of these:

- 52 (49%) were male.
- 33 (30.8%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 50 (46.7%) use more than one drug.
- 83 (77.5%) were new cases and 15 (14%) were previously treated.

524 cases entered alcohol treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2019.

Of these:

- 387 (73.8%) were male.
- 251 (47.9%) use more than one drug.
- 309 (58.9%) were new cases and 162 (30.9%) were previously treated.

822 cases entered drug treatment under the age of 18 in 2019^c.

Of these:

The majority, 697 (84.7%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.

- 656 (79.8%) were male.
- 260 (31.6%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 403 (49.0%) use more than one drug.
- 618 (75.1%) were new cases.

2,142 cases entered drug treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2019.

^bThe NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care.

^c The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care.

Of these:

- The majority, 849 (39.6%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.
- 1,716 (80.1%) were male.
- 1,256 (58.6%) use more than one drug.
- 1,162 (54.2%) were new cases and 829 (38.7%) were previously treated.

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status, treatment status, frequency of use) up to 2019 see library interactive tables]

How many young people die from using alcohol and drugs?

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. NDRDI data shows that there was a total of 86 drug and/or alcohol related deaths among persons aged 24 years or younger in 2017 (Table 3) (unpublished data from the NDRDI).

Table 3: Number of NDRDI* deaths by gender among persons aged 24 years or younger, in 2017

2017	Male	Female
Poisoning	15	~
Non poisoning	26	12

*These deaths do not include deaths among those known to be 'alcohol dependent only' (i.e. no history of drug misuse) who died of non-poisoning death.

~Less than five deaths.

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

The [National Self-Harm Registry Ireland](#) is a national system of population monitoring for the occurrence of hospital-treated self-harm.⁷ Data was collected from hospital emergency departments on patients aged from 10 to 29 years. Intentional drug overdose was most common among 15–19-year-olds (58.7% for males, 71.6% for females). While rare as a sole method of self-harm, alcohol was present among those aged 20–24 years for both males (37.5%) and females (33.1%). Between 2007 and 2016 the rate of self-harm in young people aged 10-24 years increased by 22%.

What does the law say about underage drinking?

Intoxicating Liquor Acts

- It is an offence to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18.
- It is an offence to buy alcohol for people under the age of 18.
- It is also an offence to give alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 unless in a domestic home and they have parental consent.

See more at [Citizens Information](#)

The [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act 2018](#) aims to reduce alcohol consumption in Ireland to 9.1 litres per person per annum by 2020 and to reduce the harms associated with alcohol. The Act consists of 29 sections and includes five main provisions. These are: minimum unit pricing; health labelling of alcohol products; the regulation of advertising and sponsorship of alcohol products; structural

separation of alcohol products in mixed trading outlets; and the regulation of the sale and supply of alcohol in certain circumstances.

References

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7. Griffin Eve, McMahon Elaine, McNicholas Fiona, Corcoran Paul, Perry Ivan J and Arensman Ella (2018) [Increasing rates of self-harm among children, adolescents and young adults: a 10-year national registry study 2007-2016](#). *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 53, (7), pp. 663-671.

Further reading:

- Department of Health (2019) [Healthy Ireland survey 2019 summary of findings](#). Dublin: Stationery Office.
- HRB National Drugs Library [prevalence page](#)

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