

Press release

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Latest Drug trends in Europe. HRB compares Irish situation with European findings.

European countries are faced with a new drug market which sells legal alternatives to illegal drugs, such as cannabis and stimulants according to the latest report on the state of the drugs problem published by the European Monitoring Committee on Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). The report also states that heroin use is no longer in decline across Europe, and cocaine use is continuing to rise in some countries including Ireland

The Health Research Board (HRB) provides the Irish statistics on drug use for the EMCDDA report. This briefing note compares the situation here in Ireland with Europe.

The European report highlights the need for vigilance in response to four key areas:

- New drug markets which sell legal alternatives to illegal drugs
- Continued rise in cocaine use
- Growing concern over the health consequences of opiate (mainly heroin) use
- Polydrug use (use of more than one drug by an individual)

New legal alternatives to illegal drugs

Ireland is among countries facing a new drug market which sells legal alternatives to illegal drugs. The internet and 'head' shops are the main sales outlets. The market is demonstrating an ability to adapt quickly to control measures and production processes. Product ranges and marketing approaches are highly innovative.

In 2008, there were 11 new synthetic drugs and two plant-based substances reported to the EMCDDA. The plant substances were used traditionally in African, South American or Asian cultures.

Some legal alternatives identified in recent years include:

Synthetic cannabinoids

Spice, Smoke, and Sense is sold as an alternative to cannabis and a synthetic cannabinoid, JHW-018, was identified in some of these products in Ireland and other European Countries. Germany, France, Luxembourg, Austria and Poland have taken legal action to remove Spice from the market. The spice-type substances are now being replaced with Smoke and Sense. All of these products are available in 'head' shops in Ireland or can be purchased over the internet in Ireland or from the UK. It has been observed that the product's list of ingredients on the package do not usually correspond with the contents identified during laboratory analysis.

1-benzylpiperazine (BZP)

BZP is a synthetic mood altering substance which has been sold as an alternative to ecstasy under the name of 'Legal E', 'Legal X' 'XTC', 'A2', 'piperazine', or 'party pills'. In Ireland, party pills containing BZP have been widely sold in 'head' shops up to the end of March this year. On 31 March 2009 BZP was declared a controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. Possession or sale of BZP is now a criminal offence in Ireland.

Cathinones

Six of the 13 new drugs contained cathinone which is a chemical stimulant found in the shrub Khat. Cathinones are related to amphetamines and ecstasy. Mephedrone (MCAT) and Methylone, derivatives of cathinone, are currently being sold online and in 'head' shops as 'legal highs' across Europe (including Ireland). The use of the drug can induce anxiety and paranoia. Mephedrone has been linked to two deaths in Sweden in 2008. Reports say that its use can become compulsive and can create a state of psychological dependence.

Meta-chlorophenylpiperazine (mCPP)

In Ireland in 2008 there were 12 seizures of chlorophenylpiperazine tablets (a total of 2,010 tablets) and the chemical meta-chlorophenylpiperazine (mCPP) was detected in a number of the seized tablets. This is another mood altering substance.

A growing concern over heroin use in Europe

European situation

- There are between 1.2 and 1.5 million problem opiate (mainly heroin) users in the EU and Norway.
- The number of new cases entering treatment increased by 6% between 2002 and 2007. The countries are Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, Latvia, Romania, Slovenia and Croatia.
- Eight EU countries report an increase in new opiate cases entering treatment since 2006.
- Around 85% of fatal overdoses across Europe are associated with opiate use.
- Fourteen countries reported an increase in opiate-related deaths in 2006/7 when compared to 2004. The countries include Finland, France, Luxembourg, Portugal Sweden and the United Kingdom.
- Between 2002 and 2007 heroin seizures increased on average by 4% across Europe.

Ireland - a comparison

- Ireland represents 1% of problem opiate users in Europe. The latest Irish figures indicate that there are between 13,405 and 15,819 problem opiate users in Ireland.
- The number of new cases of opiates entering treatment has increased by 67% from 809 cases in 2002 to 1,350 in 2008.
- Opiates account for 60% of people presenting for treatment for drug problems in Ireland.
- In Ireland 74% of fatal overdoses were associated with opiate use.
- In Ireland there is a higher than average increase of heroin seizures, with 660 seizures during 2003 compared to 1,698 in 2007.

The continued rise in cocaine use in Europe

Europe situation

- Cocaine use is on the rise with three million young Europeans using it in the past year.
- In high prevalence countries (Denmark, Spain, Ireland, Italy and the UK), between 3.1% and 5.5% of young adults used cocaine in the last year.

Ireland - a comparison

- In Ireland, the proportion of young adults (15-34 years) in the general population who reported using cocaine in the last year was 3.1%, which places Ireland among the high prevalence countries.
- Treatment demand also increased in Ireland, from 81 cases reporting cocaine as the main problem drug in 2001 to 770 cases in 2007 and increased marginally to 775 cases in 2008.
- There were 53 deaths as a result of poisoning from cocaine, alone or with another drug in 2007- representing 29% of drug-induced deaths.
- As experienced in many EU countries, the number of cocaine seizures in Ireland has increased with time, from 566 in 2003 to 1,749 in 2006.

Ireland's cocaine problem is the result of a number of factors including, availability, price, affluence, a young population and geography – we are in the group of countries most affected by the supply chain

Selected issue – polydrug use patterns and responses among school children, young adults and problem drug users

Research indicates that polydrug use among children increases the toxic effects and in later life may lead to chronic health problems. Strategies to address nightlife settings have the potential to decrease the harm caused by polydrug use

European situation

Polydrug use **among 15-16 year old school children** across Europe was defined as the use of cigarettes, alcohol and illegal drugs in the last month:

- 20% reported use of alcohol and cigarettes
- 6% reported use of cannabis with alcohol and/or cigarettes

Ireland - a comparison

- 21% reported use of alcohol and cigarettes
- 9% reported use of cannabis with alcohol and/or cigarettes

European situation

Polydrug use **among young adults (15-34 years)** is indicative of established patterns of drug use. European data indicate that, in the last year frequent or heavy alcohol users in this age group are:

- Between two and six times more likely to use cannabis
- Nine times more likely to use cocaine.
- Polydrug use among the treated population indicates that 57% of the problem drug users entering treatment in 14 selected European countries reported two or more problem drugs.
- A high proportion of fatal overdoses are caused by a combination of drugs including alcohol.
- Strategies such as high-quality substitution treatment programmes and contingency management approaches have been shown to reduce multiple drug use.

Ireland-a comparison

- Frequent or heavy young alcohol users were twice as likely to use cannabis or cocaine; this is lower than the European average but may be explained by the higher proportion of frequent or heavy drinkers in the Irish population.
- 70% of drug users entering treatment in 2008 reported problematic use of two or more drugs; this is higher than the reported experience across Europe.
- Since 2004 more than one third of problem drug users entering treatment reported alcohol as an additional problem drug.
- In 2005 three-fifths of fatal overdoses are as a result of two or more drugs and 31% involve alcohol.
- The NACD's ROSIE study revealed that opiate users entering substitution treatment reduced use of other problem drugs after one year in treatment.
- Recently the Drug Treatment Centre Board reported that contingency management reduced drug use among young drug users.

Amphetamine and ecstasy use stabilising in Europe

Europe situation

- In Europe the use of amphetamines and ecstasy are stable and, in some cases, in decline.
- Ecstasy use across Europe has remained steady with two million (1.8%) young adults using the drug in the past year.

Ireland – a comparison

- Amphetamine use in Ireland is uncommon and the proportion of adults who reported using amphetamines in the last year remained stable at 0.4%, when compared with the previous survey in 2002/2003.
- In Ireland, ecstasy use remained stable with 2.4% of young adults reporting use of the drug in the past year compared to 2.3% in 2002/2003.

A copy of the EMCDDA Annual report is available at:

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/events/2009/annual-report>.

Data presented in the Annual report 2009 relate to 2007 or the last year available.