

Factsheet – Cannabis: the Irish situation

April 2019

What is cannabis?

Cannabis is a natural product, the main psychoactive constituent of which is tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Herbal cannabis and cannabis resin are formally known as marijuana and hashish. Cannabis cigarettes may be called reefers, joints or spliffs.¹

What does cannabis do?

All forms of cannabis are mind-altering and act by affecting the part of the brain where memories are formed. Small doses have very mild effects, sometimes none in the first time user.

Short-term effects of cannabis may include:

- Difficulty learning and remembering
- Distorted sense of vision, hearing or touch
- Trouble thinking and problem-solving
- Loss of co-ordination
- Increased heart rate, anxiety, panic attacks.²

How do we know how many people use cannabis in Ireland?

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.³ 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).

How many people use cannabis in Ireland?

The 2014/15 survey³ involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland). The results for Ireland showed that:

- Just over one in four people had used cannabis making it the most commonly used illegal drug in Ireland.
- 27.9% had used it at least once (lifetime use).

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

- 7.7% had used it in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 4.4% had used it in the last month (current use).
- 35.8% of men had used it, compared to 20% of women (lifetime use).
- Lifetime usage of cannabis is highest amongst the 25 to 34 age group with 40.4% in this age group having used this drug at some stage during their lives. Those aged 15 to 24 are the most likely to have used cannabis both in the past year (16.2%) and past month (9.2%).

The latest survey estimates show a rise in the percentage of cannabis users in the general population aged 15–64.

Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of cannabis use in the general population

	2002/03 %	2006/7 %	2010/11 %	2014/15 ^a %
Lifetime	17.3	21.9	25.3	27.9
Last year	5.1	6.3	6.0	7.7
Last month	2.6	2.6	2.8	4.4

An estimated 17.2 million (14.1%) young Europeans (aged 15–34) used cannabis in the last year, with 9.8 million (17.4%) of these aged 15–24. Among young people using cannabis in the last year, the ratio of males to females is two to one.⁴

How many Irish 15–16-year-old students use cannabis?

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see www.espad.org). The sixth survey⁵, conducted in 36 European countries during 2014/15, collected information on alcohol, tobacco and illicit drug use. 1,400 Irish students were surveyed in 2015.

- More male (22.4%) than female respondents (15.5%) have ever tried cannabis (lifetime use).
- 16.8% of students had used cannabis in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 9.8% had use cannabis in the last 30 days (current use).
- Around 70% of students who had used cannabis first did so at age 14 or 15 and the mean age of initiation was 14 years-old.
- 43.4% perceived that it would be fairly or very easy to get cannabis if they wanted it.
- A quarter of students (25.8%) said that there was no risk in trying cannabis and most students (32.5%) said that there was only a slight risk in trying it once or twice.

How many people receive treatment for cannabis use?

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland^b

^b 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.

The most recent published data from the NDTRS⁶ shows that:

Cannabis remains the second most common main problem drug. The proportion of cases who reported cannabis increased from 25.8% in 2011 to 28.2% in 2015, then decreased to 24.7% in 2017.

In 2017, cannabis (39.1%) was the most common main problem drug reported by new cases.

Of the 2,200 cases in 2017 who reported cannabis as their main problem drug:⁷

- 1,272 (39.1%) were new cases.
- 1,690 (33.1%) used cannabis with other drugs.

What does the law say about cannabis?

Cannabis is on the list of drugs that are controlled by law. A person found in possession of cannabis or cannabis resin is guilty of an offence. It is also an offence to grow cannabis plants. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

Seizures of cannabis

Cannabis accounts for the largest number of drug seizures in Ireland, as reported by the [Central Statistics Office](#). Seizures are made by Garda and Revenue Customs officers and include cannabis herb, plants and resin. Although there was a 10% spike in seizures in 2011, between 2011 and 2015 the number of seizures declined each year, with 2015 figures nearly half those of figures in 2011. One possible explanation for this outcome is that Gardaí have targeted the cannabis cultivation industry in numerous operations in recent years.⁷

The Garda send drugs seized to the [laboratory of Forensic Science Ireland \(FSI\)](#) for analysis. FSI prepare a quarterly report for the Garda and the data presented here are from the combined report for 2014. This tells us the number of cases involving drugs initiated by the Garda and gives a picture of the relative frequency of the various types of illicit drugs seized. 1,049 cases were associated with seizures of cannabis herb, 182 with cannabis plants and 192 with cannabis resin.⁸

For more information on cannabis please refer to the following sources:

1. EMCDDA website [cannabis profile](#)
2. The independent health website at www.irishhealth.com/article.html?id=454
3. National Advisory Committee on Drugs & Public Health Information and Research Branch (2016) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland & drug use in Northern Ireland](#). Bulletin 1. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.
4. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018) [European Drug Report 2017: trends and developments](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
5. Taylor, Keishia and Babineau, Kate and Keogan, Sheila and Whelan, Ellen and Clancy, Luke (2016) [ESPAD 2015: European Schools Project on alcohol and other drugs in Ireland](#). Dublin: Department of Health.

6. NDTRS bulletin Health Research Board. (2019) [Drug Treatment in Ireland NDTRS 2011 - 2017](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
7. Health Research Board. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018) [Ireland: national report for 2017 - drug markets and crime](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

See also

(2016) [ESPAD report 2015 results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs](#). Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.

(2017) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland and drug use in Northern Ireland 2014/15: regional drug and alcohol task force \(Ireland\) and health and social care trust \(Northern Ireland\) results](#). Bulletin 2. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.

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