

Factsheet: Cannabis - the Irish situation



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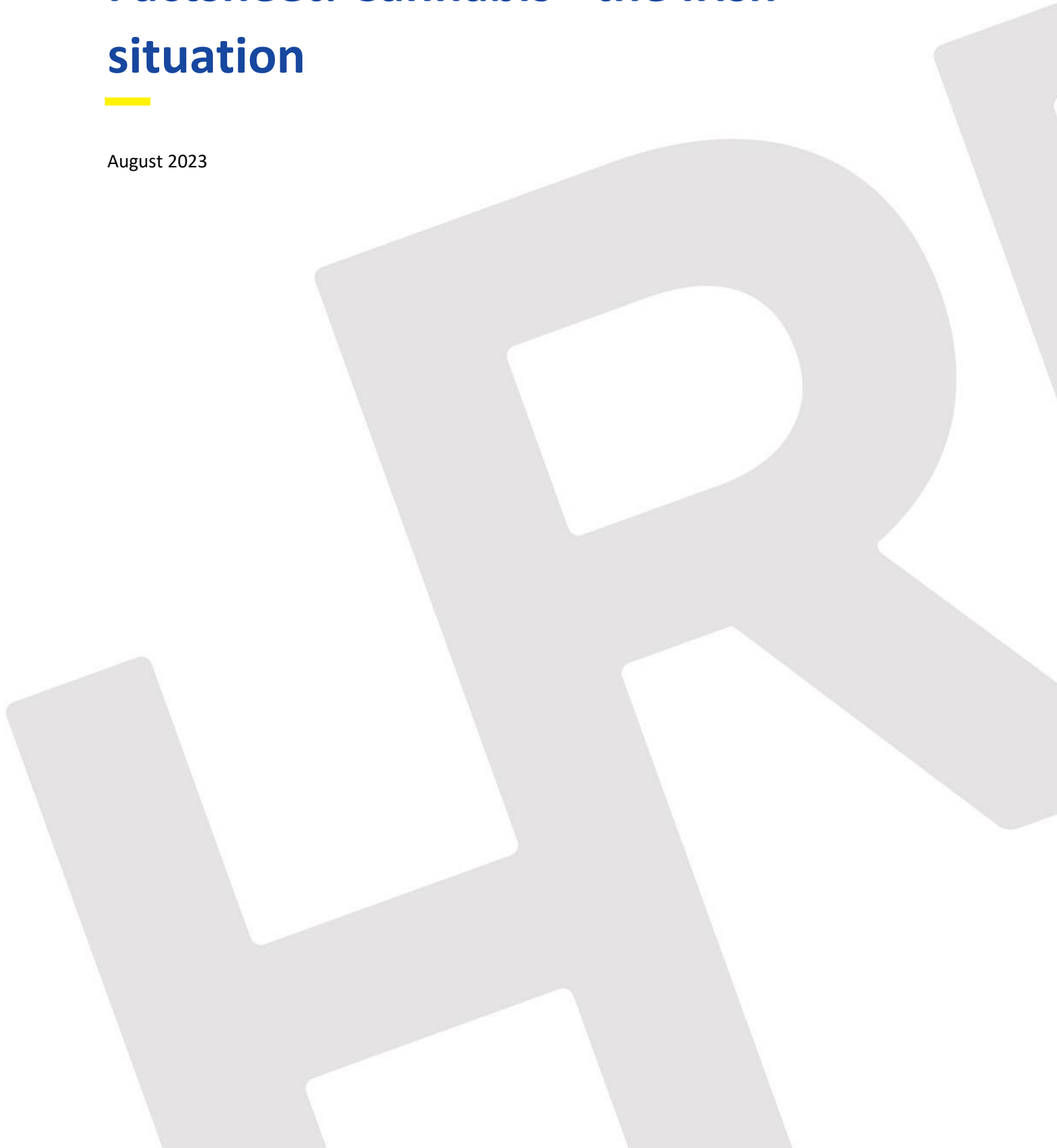


Table of Contents

Table of Contents 1

Glossary of terms..... 1

What is cannabis?..... 2

What does cannabis do? 2

How do we know how many people use cannabis in Ireland? 2

How many people use cannabis in Ireland?..... 2

How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland use cannabis? 3

How many people receive treatment for cannabis use? 4

What does the law say about cannabis? 5

Seizures of cannabis 5

References..... 5

Glossary of terms

Last month prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. A proportion of those reporting current use may be occasional (or first-time) users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey. It should therefore be noted that current use is not synonymous with regular use.

Last year prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the year prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

Lifetime prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported ever having used the named drug at the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have necessarily used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

Mean (average) versus Median – One of the most used statistical measures is the mean (more often simply termed the ‘average’). The mean/average is the sum of the characteristics of the group (e.g. ages, wages or prices) divided by the number in the group. To represent the central tendency of a group, median is the appropriate statistical measure. The median is found by ordering the group characteristics in ascending value and selecting the middle one. The median is a better measure of the central tendency of the group as it is not skewed by exceptionally high or low characteristic values.

Prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a drug over a particular time period.

Statistically significant – a result is deemed statistically significant if it is unlikely to have occurred by chance, and hence provides enough evidence to reject the hypothesis of ‘no effect’. As used in statistics, ‘significant’ does not mean important or meaningful. A small, but important, real-world difference may fail to reach significance in a statistical test, while a statistically significant finding may have no practical consequence.

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 a survey of the general population takes place to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use alcohol and other drugs.³ Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ normally resident in households in 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.³ (For other populations, see our [prevalence sources](#).)

Drug prevalence surveys were undertaken in 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, and 2014–15. These surveys were commissioned on an all-island basis by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol in the Republic of Ireland, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland. The most recent survey 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS), which took place in the Republic of Ireland, was managed by the Health Research Board.

How many people use cannabis in Ireland?

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.³ The results for Ireland showed that:

- 20.7% of respondents had used cannabis in their lifetime, corresponding to 809,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older.
- 5.9% of respondents (231,000 of the general population) and 2.9% of respondents (113,000 of the general population) had used cannabis in the last year and last month, respectively.
- 1.2% of respondents (45,000 of the general population) met the criteria for cannabis use disorder.
- The average age of first cannabis use was 19.7 years (median: 19 years).
- The average age of respondents who reported recent cannabis use was 29.9 years (median: 27 years).

- The average age of first regular cannabis use was 20.6 years (median: 20 years).
- The proportion of survey respondents who personally knew somebody who used cannabis was 40.3%.

Between 2002–03 and 2014–15, recent cannabis use among 15–64-year-olds increased from 5.0% to 7.7%, and was 7.1% in the current survey. Between 2014–15 and 2019–20, recent cannabis use among males decreased from 11.2% to 9.9%, while remaining stable among females.

One-fifth (22.7%) of current users used cannabis on 20 days or more in the previous month, which is daily or almost daily use. This was more common among males (29.4%) than females (7.5%) and among older (30.5%) than younger (19.8%) respondents.

The prevalence of cannabis use disorder (CUD) in 2019–20 was 1.2%, representing 45,000 of the Irish population; this included 0.5% with cannabis abuse and 0.6% with cannabis dependence. The prevalence of CUD was 1.6% for males and 0.8% for females. The highest prevalence was observed among 15–34-year-olds (2.8%). Of those who had used cannabis in the last year, 19.6% met the criteria for CUD, including 19.0% of male and 20.9% of female cannabis users.

Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of cannabis use among 15–64-year-olds (%)

	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	17.3	21.9*	25.3	27.9*	27.1*
Last year	5.1	6.3*	6.0	7.7*	7.1
Last month	2.6	2.6	2.8	4.4*	3.4*

* Significant change ($p < 0.05$) in prevalence of cannabis when compared with prevalence reported in the previous survey.

For further information on cannabis use (prevalence and treatment) by County see our [Regional data factsheets](#).

Cannabis is the most used illicit drug in Europe, across all age groups. Last year cannabis use among the EU population aged 15–34 is estimated at 15.1%. It is estimated that around 2% of adults (15–64) are daily or almost daily cannabis users.⁴

How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland 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 seventh survey⁵ 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.

- More male (23.8%) than female respondents (14.7%) have ever tried cannabis (lifetime use).
- 16% of students had used cannabis in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 9% had used cannabis in the last 30 days (current use).
- Around 79% of students who had used cannabis first did so at age 14 or 15 and the mean age of initiation was 15.2 years old.

- 42% perceived that it would be fairly or very easy to get cannabis if they wanted it.
- 31.9% of respondents said that there was no risk in trying cannabis.

For further information on cannabis use by young people see [Factsheet: young people, drugs and alcohol: the Irish situation](#)

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^a

The most recent published data from the NDTRS⁶ shows that:

- Cannabis was the third most common main problem drug.
- The proportion of cases treated for cannabis as a main problem decreased from 26.4% in 2016 to 18.7% in 2022.
- Among young cases aged 19 years or younger, cannabis was the main drug generating treatment demand.
- Among *new cases* the proportion reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased from 41.2% in 2016 to 32.8% in 2022.
- Cannabis (40.3%) was the most common additional drug in 2022 reported by cases with polydrug use.
- As an additional drug, cannabis increased steadily over the period from 32.9% of cases in 2016 to 42.0% in 2021, but decreased slightly to 40.3% in 2022. In the years 2016 to 2019, alcohol was more common as an additional problem than cannabis. However, from 2020 onwards cannabis has become more common than alcohol as an additional problem.

Table 2: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2016 to 2022

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
All cases	9227	8922	10274	10664	9702	10769	12009
Cannabis	2439 (26.4)	2200 (24.7)	2358 (23.0)	2502 (23.5)	2120 (21.9)	2299 (21.3)	2245 (18.7)
New cases	3626	3257	3962	3979	3796	4206	4456
Cannabis	1452 (41.2)	1272 (39.1)	1505 (38.0)	1506 (37.8)	1338 (35.2)	1479 (35.2)	1463 (32.8)
Previously treated cases	5335	5242	5872	5927	5441	6090	6860
Cannabis	908 (17.0)	807 (15.4)	717 (12.2)	784 (13.2)	691 (12.7)	740 (12.2)	711 (10.4)

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2021 see library [interactive tables](#)]

^a 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.

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

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. Between 2015 and 2017, an increasing trend was evident 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 [Forensic Science Ireland \(FSI\)](#) for analysis. Cannabis-type seizures accounted for nearly 49% of all drug seizures in 2021. While FSI analyses reduced by 21% between 2017 and 2018, the number of cannabis-type seizures in 2019 (3,071) was more than double the number analysed in 2018. While a slight increase was evident in 2020, it was very small (<.5%). The number of seizures analysed in 2021 (7,866) was two times higher than 2020 (3,706) figures.⁷

References

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For regional Irish data, please see our [regional factsheets webpage](#).

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