Factsheet – Cocaine: the Irish situation

July 2020

What is cocaine?
Cocaine is a colourless substance obtained from the leaves of certain types of coca plant. There are basically two chemical forms of cocaine:

- Cocaine powder is a white crystalline powder (hydrochloride salt) and is the most commonly used form. Drug dealers often dilute cocaine powder with other substances, such as talcum powder or sugar (lactose), or local anaesthetic (lignocaine). It is usually inhaled through a thin straw, or dissolved in water and injected.
- Crack cocaine is an off-white solid substance made by dissolving cocaine powder in a mixture of water and baking soda; this mixture is boiled, dried and broken into rock-like chunks. It can be smoked, or dissolved in an acidic liquid and injected.¹

What does cocaine do?
The effects of cocaine occur very rapidly and include raised blood pressure, increased body temperature, stimulation, reduction in hunger and thirst, dilation of pupils and feelings of great energy and alertness. Repeated sniffing of cocaine powder irritates the nose and can cause a breakdown of nasal cartilage.¹

How do we know how many people use cocaine 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.² Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ 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 cocaine in Ireland?
The 2014/15 survey involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland). The results for Ireland showed that:

² In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years.
• Lifetime usage of cocaine (including crack) and cocaine powder at 6.6% and 6.4% respectively.
• The percentage of respondents aged 15-64 years who reported using cocaine (including crack) at some point in their lives increased from 7% to 8%.
• The proportion of young adults (15-34) who reported using cocaine in their lifetimes has also increased from 9% to 11%.
• Similar to the previous studies, more men reported using cocaine in their lifetimes compared to women (11% vs. 5%).

The latest survey estimates show a rise in the percentage of cocaine users in the general population aged 15-64:

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2002/03 %</th>
<th>2006/7 %</th>
<th>2010/11 %</th>
<th>2014/15 %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last month</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is estimated that about 17 million Europeans (5.1% of the population aged 15–64 years) have used cocaine at least once in their life. In the last year it is estimated that 3.5 million (1.1%) of adults (15–64) and 2.3 million (1.9%) of young adults (15–34) used cocaine.³

**How many people receive treatment for cocaine use?**

The National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.⁴

Cocaine was the second most common drug reported in 2019, having ranked third since 2015. The proportion of cocaine cases increased from 7.9% in 2013 to 24.0% in 2019.

A total of 2,560 cases were treated for cocaine use in 2019, an increase from 708 cases in 2013.

- The number of new cases treated has risen from 320 in 2013 to 1,258 in 2019.
- The median age for cases treated has increased from 29 in 2013 to 30 in 2019.
- Males accounted for 4 in every 5 cases (79.8%) over the reporting period.
- The proportion of cases in paid employment increased from 18.2% in 2013 to 30.6% in 2019.
- The proportion of cases that reported using more than one drug decreased over the period from 77% in 2013 to 58% in 2019.
- In 2019, crack cocaine accounted for 14.3% of all cases treated for cocaine as a main problem drug.
- The most common additional drugs reported among cocaine cases were alcohol (57.3%), cannabis (47.6%) and benzodiazepines (28.3%).

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³ 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.
How many people die from using cocaine?
The National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI) is a database of cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and people who are alcohol dependent. Deaths where cocaine was implicated increased by 153% since 2010. Cocaine poisoning deaths increased from 42 deaths in 2016 to 53 in 2017. Cocaine and cannabis were the most common drugs used by those who died as a result of hanging.\(^5\)

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies
According to the Hospital In-Patient Enquiry (HIPE) scheme there were 4,628 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2017. Cocaine was present in 168 (3.6%) of cases.\(^6\)

What does the law say about cocaine?
Cocaine is on the list of drugs that are controlled by law. A person found in possession of cocaine powder or crack cocaine is guilty of an offence. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the Citizens Information Board website.

Seizures of cocaine
Except for a 10% spike between 2013 and 2014, the number of cocaine seizures has decreased from a peak of 1,749 in 2007 to 364 in 2015. One possible explanation for this is that the economy in Ireland was not doing well in 2013 and 2014. Although an increase in cocaine analyses was seen in 2016 (63%) and 2017 (33%), this trend was not seen in 2018. Moreover, between 2017 and 2018, there was a 25% decrease in cocaine seizures.\(^7\)

For more information on cocaine, please refer to the following sources:

And see also, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2016) Perspectives on drugs: cocaine trafficking to Europe. Lisbon: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

How to cite this factsheet:

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