

Factsheet: Cocaine - the Irish situation



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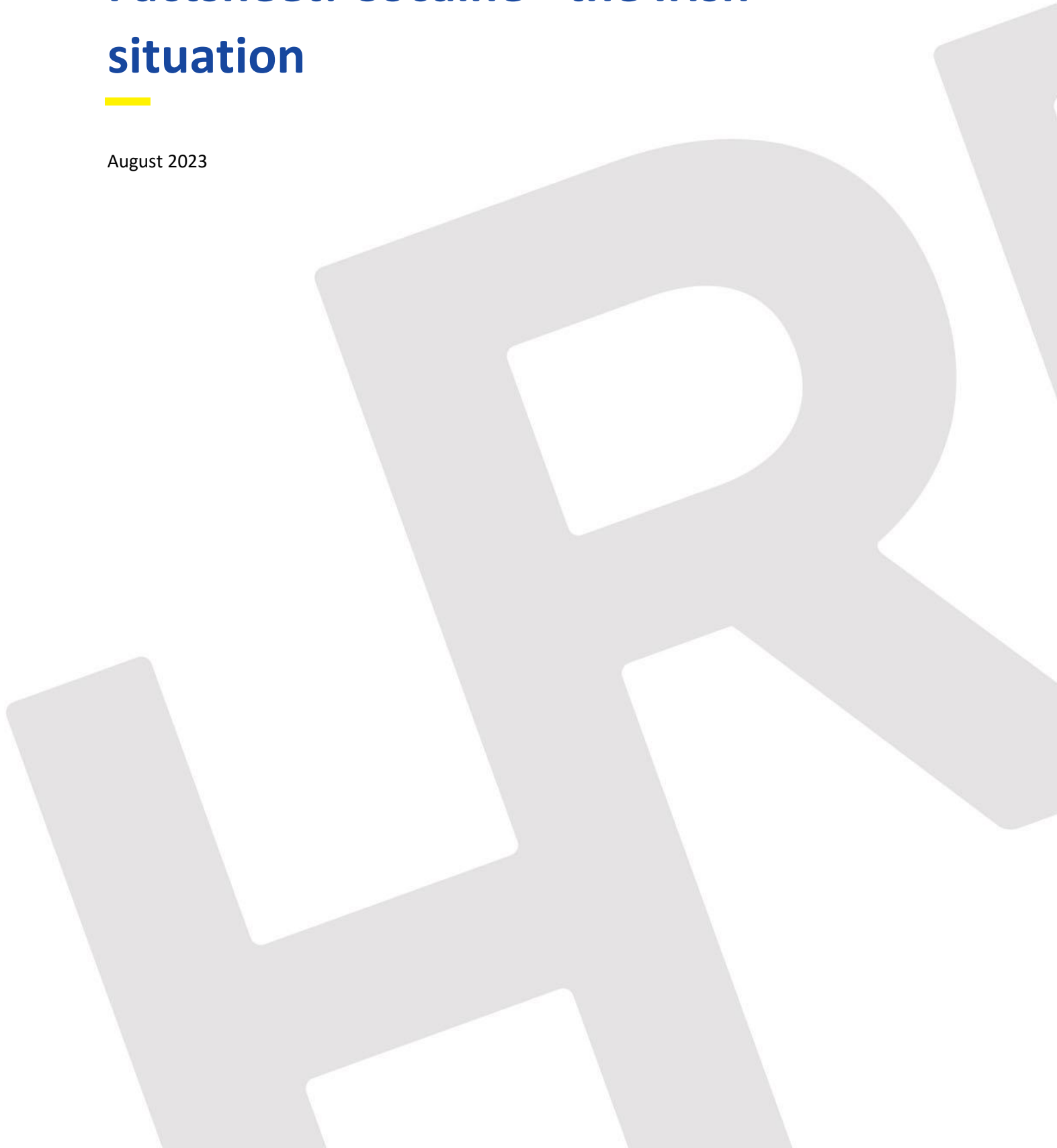


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Glossary of terms

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.

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 a survey of the general population takes place to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use alcohol and other drugs.² 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.² (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 cocaine in Ireland?

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.² The results for Ireland showed that:

- 6.6% of respondents had ever used cocaine in their lifetime, corresponding to 260,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older.
- 1.9% of respondents (72,000 of the general population) and 0.6% of respondents (23,000 of the general population) had used cocaine in the last year and last month, respectively.
- The average age of first cocaine use was 21.9 years (median: 21 years).

- The average age of participants who reported recent cocaine use was 28.4 years (median: 27 years).
- The average age of first regular cocaine use was 23.5 years (median: 22 years).
- The proportion of respondents who personally knew somebody who used cocaine was 26.7%.
- 84.9% of lifetime users also used alcohol on the occasion of first cocaine use.

The latest survey estimates show a rise in the percentage of cocaine users in the general population aged 15-64 Table 1.

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

	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	3.0	5.3*	6.8	7.8	8.3
Last year	1.1	1.7*	1.5	1.5	2.3*
Last month	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.7

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

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

In the EU, surveys indicate that nearly 2.4 million 15-34-year-olds (2.4% of this age group) used cocaine in the last year. Of the 11 European countries that have conducted surveys since 2020 and provided confidence intervals, five reported higher estimates than their previous comparable survey.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.

Cocaine was the most common drug reported in 2022, accounting for 34.0% of all cases, a 25.7% increase from 2021. Cocaine was also the most common main drug among new cases in 2022, similar to the previous two years. Powder cocaine was the most common type of cocaine generating demand for treatment and accounted for 78.0% of all cases treated for cocaine as a main problem, while crack cocaine accounted for 22.0% of all cocaine cases.⁴

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
Cocaine	1138 (12.3)	1500 (16.8)	2254 (21.9)	1560 (24.0)	2619 (27.0)	3248 (30.2)	4084 (34.0)
New cases	3626	3257	3962	3979	3796	4206	4456
Cocaine	568 (16.1)	748 (23.0)	12.32 (31.1)	1258 (31.6)	1359 (35.8)	1615 (38.4)	1839 (41.3)
Previously treated cases	5335	5242	5872	5927	5441	6090	6860

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Cocaine	541 (10.1)	692 (13.2)	944 (16.1)	1074 (18.1)	1126 (20.7)	1478 (24.3)	1981 (28.9)

Powder cocaine

In 2022, 3,186 cases were recorded with powder cocaine as the main problem:

- almost 8-in-10 cases (78.6%) were male, while 2-in-10 were female (21.3%)
- the median age when entering treatment for powder cocaine was 30 years
- the proportion of cases aged 17 years or younger was 1.4%
- powder cocaine cases resided in every county in Ireland. More than 4-in-10 (44.3%) of all cases entering treatment for powder cocaine resided in County Dublin, followed by counties Cork (8.0%), Limerick (5.0%) and Wicklow (4.3%)
- 41.4% were in paid employment, while 49.2% were unemployed
- 5.1% were homeless
- 2.5% reported having ever injected
- the most common route of administration for powder cocaine was sniff/snort (97.5%)
- the proportion of cases with polydrug use was 59.4% in 2022. The most common additional drugs among cases with powder cocaine as a main problem were alcohol (62.1%), cannabis (53.7%), and benzodiazepines (23.7%).

Crack cocaine

In 2022, 898 cases were recorded with crack cocaine as the main problem:

- more than 4-in-10 (42.0%) of entering treatment for crack cocaine as the main problem were female, while 58.0% were male
- the median age when entering treatment for crack cocaine was 39 years
- the proportion of cases aged 17 years or younger was 0.4%
- crack cocaine cases resided in almost every county in Ireland, with the exception of five counties (Galway, Leitrim, Kilkenny, Monaghan and Sligo) which had no reported cases. The vast majority (88.2%) of all cases entering treatment for crack cocaine resided in County Dublin, followed by Kildare (2.0%), Meath (1.7%) and Limerick (1.6%)
- 5.6% were in paid employment, while 78.2% were unemployed
- 24.7% were homeless
- 30.1% reported having ever injected
- The most common route of administration for crack cocaine was smoking (96.2%)
- the proportion of cases with polydrug use was 62.2% in 2022. The most common additional drugs among cases with crack cocaine as a main problem were opioids (70.3%), benzodiazepines (37.0%) and cannabis (35.2%).

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

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. In 2020, 409 deaths were poisonings, 3 in 10 of these involved cocaine. Cocaine poisoning deaths increased from 24 deaths in 2011 to 130 in 2020.⁵

Table 2: Cocaine implicated in poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
All poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409
Cocaine	24	26	32	42	46	42	55	78	105	130

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\)](#) scheme there were 5,402 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2020. Cocaine was present in 313 (5.8%) 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%) Although a decrease of 25% was shown in 2018, this was followed by a substantial increase in 2019 (N=2231), when the number of cocaine seizures analysed was close to four times higher than in 2018 (N=595). The number of cocaine seizures analysed in 2020 was 11% lower than those analysed in 2019. Between 2020 and 2021, cocaine seizures analysed increased by 34%.⁷

References

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7. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2023) [Ireland: national report for 2022 – drug markets and crime](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

And see also, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Europol (2022) [EU drug market: cocaine – in-depth analysis](#). Lisbon: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

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

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