Factsheet – Opioids: the Irish situation

July 2020

What are opiates?
Opiates are derived from the dried milk of the opium poppy. Synthetic opiates are called opioids. Heroin is the most commonly used opioid. Methadone, which is used as a substitute drug in the treatment of heroin addiction, is also an opioid.

What do opiates do?
Opiates are sedative drugs that depress the nervous system. They induce feelings of relaxation and detachment in the user. The more often the drug is used the greater the quantity needed to produce the desired effect. Physical dependence often results from regular use and withdrawal can be very unpleasant. Opiates can be smoked, snorted or prepared for injection. Overdosing on an opiate can be fatal.¹

How do we know how many people use opiates in Ireland?
Researchers in Ireland use a number of sources of information to estimate the number of opiate users in the population. These include:

- The Central Treatment List (CTL), which is a register of the number of people who are receiving methadone or another opioid as a substitute drug treatment which includes clinics, GPs and prisons.
- Irish Probation Service data.

How many people use opiates in Ireland?
There have been attempts in recent years to estimate the number of problem opiate users in Ireland using these overlapping sources. A 2009 study estimated that 17,387 people were using heroin in 2001, a rate of 5.6 per 1,000 of the population.² In 2014 the estimate was 18,988, a rate of 6.18 per 1,000 of the population aged 15-64.³

The most recent study shows that:

- The majority of opiate users (13,458) are resident in Co. Dublin and 5,530 in the rest of the state.
- 70% (13,022) of opiate users were male and 30% (5,966) were female.
- Approximately two thirds of opiate users (11,224) were in the 35 to 64 age group.

According to the EU drugs agency (EMCDDA) there are about 1.3 million high-risk opiate users in Europe.⁴
How many people use opiates from the General population survey?

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. Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Please note: this type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as prisoners, homeless people or hostel dwellers).

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

Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of heroin 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>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last month</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of methadone 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>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last month</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of other opiates 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>6.2</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>27.9</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last month</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+Other opiates include over-the-counter and prescription opiates such as those containing codeine.

In 2010/11 the category “Other Opiates” also asked specifically about substances containing codeine.

Other opiates (relates to opiates other than heroin and methadone and includes a number of drugs, most commonly codeine)

- Prevalence rates are significantly higher among females compared to males for lifetime (68.2% vs 59.4%), last year (51.1% vs 40.5%) and last month (25.6% vs 16.3%).
- Over 65s had the lowest prevalence rates for lifetime (49%), last year (29.7%) and last month (13.5%).
- The median age of first use of other opiates is 18 years.
- The majority (58.8%) of people who used other opiates in the last month report using other opiates on 1-3 days in the month prior to the survey. This is slightly higher in females than males (59.7% vs. 57.5%) and for younger adults (61.2%) than older adults (56.8%).

How many people receive treatment for opiate use?

According to the HSE’s Central Treatment List, as of August 2019 there were 9,939 patients

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* In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years.
receiving treatment for opiate use (outside prisons).\(^7\)

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

Opiates (mainly heroin) were the most commonly reported main problem drug. The proportion of cases treated decreased from 51.4% in 2013 to 38.8% in 2019.\(^8\)

Of the 4,133 cases who reported opiates as their main problem drug in 2019:

- 676 (17.0%) were new cases.
- 3,244 (54.7%) were previously treated cases.
- 1,180 (20.1%) used opiates with other drugs (polydrug use).

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2018 see library interactive tables 'Other opiates’ includes street/non medically used opium and morphine, codeine, synthetic opiates and opiate agonist-antagonists, as well as substitute opiates/opioids used as part of a drug treatment programme.]

**How many people die from using opiates?**

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. 376 people died from poisoning in 2017.\(^9\)

Opiates were the main drug group implicated in poisoning deaths in Ireland in 2017:

- Methadone was the most common single prescribable drug; it was implicated in 25% (95) of poisonings.
- Heroin poisoning deaths increased from 74 deaths in 2016 to 77 deaths in 2017.
- Fentanyl was implicated in 7 poisoning deaths in 2016.
- 89% (85) of deaths where methadone was implicated involved other drugs, mainly benzodiazepines.
- 86% (66) of deaths where heroin was implicated involved other drugs, mainly benzodiazepines.

People who were injecting at the time of the incident that led to their death represented 4% of all deaths in 2017.

Of those injectors who died in 2017 of a poisoning death which involved opiates:

- 41% were not alone at the time of the incident that led to their death
- 16% injected in a public place
- 19% involved a single opiate type drug.

\(^b\) 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.
Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the Hospital In-Patient Enquiry (HIPE) scheme, 4,628 cases of non-fatal overdose were discharged from Irish hospitals in 2017. Opiates were used in 15% (686) of cases.10

What does the law say about opiates?

Heroin and other opiates are on the list of controlled drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977 and 1984 and amending regulations. Under the legislation a person who has this controlled drug in their possession 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 opiates

From 2004, the number of heroin seizures analysed increased, reaching a peak in 2007 (1,698). Although heroin seizures subsequently decreased almost every year between 2007 and 2013, a substantial increase occurred between 2013 and 2014 (38%). Although an increase was evident in 2016 (35%), decreases were shown in 2014/2015 (-21%) and 2016/2017 (-25%), and an even larger decrease was shown between 2017 and 2018 (-60%).11

Other opioids: Following a peak in 2014, the number of seizures of drugs in this category continued to decline year on year, with the number of seizures in 2018 being approximately 77% lower than in 2014. Further analysis indicated that methadone was the most prominent drug in this category, accounting for between 66% and 86% of analyses between 2012 and 2017. There was only one report of codeine and one report of buprenorphine in 2018. Although Tramadol was not reported in 2018, an analysis of one seizure indicated that Tramadol was present.11

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

1. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.


Further reading:

How to cite this factsheet:

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