

Factsheet: Young people, drugs and alcohol - the Irish situation

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Glossary of terms

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) – defined according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) criteria. It is a maladaptive pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by 2 or more of the following 11 criteria occurring at any time in the last 12 months: role impairment; hazardous use; social problems; tolerance; withdrawal; longer or more use than intended; unsuccessful attempts to quit/cut down; much time spent using alcohol; reduced activities because of drinking; continued drinking despite psychological or physical problems; and alcohol cravings.

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

Heavy episodic drinking (HED) – sometimes referred to as ‘binge drinking’ and defined as consuming six or more standard drinks on a single occasion. This is approximately equivalent to three pints of beer or cider, six pub measures of spirits, or just under one bottle of wine.

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.

Introduction

This factsheet includes key Irish research on young people up to the age of 24 and will be updated as new data is published. The studies cited may report on different age groups and these are noted in the text.

Key research on drug use in young people in Ireland

There are numerous studies that include information on drug use in young people; for prevalence data we have chosen the four sources below.

HBSC - Health Behaviour in School age Children¹

In 2022, Ireland participated for the seventh time in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children¹ [HBSC](#) study. The survey included 9,071 school-children from 9 to 18 years old; 191 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated. Among other health indicators, data were collected on smoking and the use of alcohol consumption and drunkenness and cannabis.

ESPAD - European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs²

The seventh European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs³ [ESPAD](#) survey 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.

GUI - Growing up in Ireland study³

[Growing Up in Ireland](#) is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland.⁴ The study follows the progress of two cohorts: Cohort '98 (the 'Child Cohort') who were aged 9 years at first interview in 2007 and Cohort '08 (the Infant Cohort) who were just 9 months in the first wave in 2008.

Most recently, Growing up in Ireland has presented summary information on the lives and circumstances of the 20-year-olds from the fourth wave of 5,191 interviews with the Child Cohort '98 between August 2018 and June 2019.⁴

HI - Healthy Ireland survey^{5,6}

The Healthy Ireland survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours. It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 15 years and over. For the 2023 survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2022 and April 2023. 6,407 out of the total 7,411 survey respondents agreed to participate in the module on drug use providing a participation rate of 86% of survey respondents.⁵ For the 2024 Survey, a representative sample of 7,398 people, aged 15 and older and living in Ireland were interviewed between October 2023 and April 2024.⁶

All illicit drugs

A number of these surveys ask young people about their use of illicit drugs. Table 1 provides trends in drug use by young people in the 2023 Healthy Ireland survey.⁵ Those aged 15-24 (20%) are most

likely to report last year drug use. Men aged 15-24 (23%) report the highest level of last year drug use, compared to 16% of women in the same age group.

Table 1 Prevalence of illicit drug use by 15-24-year-olds (%) Healthy Ireland, 2023

	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
Any illicit drug	29.0	20.8	9.2
Cannabis	26.5	18.5	8.2
Ecstasy	9.0	4.9	1.5
Cocaine	6.8	2.2	1.0
Magic mushrooms	4.0	1.7	0.0
LSD	2.6	1.0	0.0
Ketamine	4.4	1.6	0.5
Amphetamines	1.9	1.2	0.8
NPS	0.9	0.5	0.0
Sedatives or tranquilisers	8.0	6.1	2.7
Alcohol	83.1	77.1	64.6
Tobacco	33.0	26.1	20.3

Cannabis

How many young people use cannabis in the Republic of Ireland?

The 2023 Healthy Ireland survey involved 6,407 people in Ireland.⁵ The results for those aged 15-24 showed that:

- Those aged 15–24 years were most likely to report recent (last year) cannabis use (18.5%).
- 31% of those aged 15-24 have ever used cannabis (lifetime use).
- Cannabis use in the last month is most common among those aged 15-24 (8%).

In the 2022 HBSC study, based on children aged 9 to 18, 6% of boys and 6% of girls report cannabis use in the last 12 months. Older children are more likely to report cannabis use in the last 12 months than younger children.¹

The 2019 ESPAD study of 15-16-year-old students also asked how many times in their lives they had used cannabis. Male students (23.8%) were more likely than females (14.7%) to have ever tried cannabis. Overall, 19.1% of students had ever tried cannabis, of these most had tried it once or twice. There was also a sizeable minority of students who had smoked cannabis 20 times or more (4.1%).²

In the latest Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, (70%) of 17/18-year-olds reported that they had never used cannabis³. Nearly one-third (30%) of the 17/18-year-olds reported having tried cannabis, with between 2% and 4% having tried each of ecstasy, cocaine, painkillers and aerosols/glue. Almost 10% stated that they currently smoked cannabis occasionally or more than once per week.

Also, a key findings report from the GUI study⁷ presents findings on the lives of 20-year-olds, and shows:

- 59% of all 20-year-olds reported that they had ‘ever tried cannabis’

- 26% said they had tried cannabis once or twice
- 18% said that they took it occasionally
- 6% took it more than once a week
- 9% don't take cannabis anymore
- 13% reported that they had tried 'ecstasy, cocaine etc.' less than 5 times
- 9% of all young adults had used 'prescription drugs for "recreational" use.

Alcohol

Alcohol use by young people

In the most recent ESPAD survey² 73% of respondents had tried alcohol and 41% were current users (had used alcohol in the previous 30 days), while 16% reported having been drunk in the previous 30 days. Increased alcohol use was associated with lower parental education levels and lower parental monitoring, as well as with truancy, lower school grades, and peer alcohol use. The reasons given most frequently for using alcohol were to make social gatherings more fun (49%) and to help respondents "to enjoy a party" (48%).

In the 2024 HBSC study 19% of children report that they have had an alcoholic drink in the last 30 days (19% in 2018). Girls and older children are more likely to report that they have had an alcoholic drink in the last 30 days.¹

Overall, 18% of children report ever having been 'really drunk' (19% in 2018). Girls and older children are more likely to report ever having been 'really drunk'.¹

The 2024 Health Ireland survey telephone interviews took place between October 2023 and April 2024 with 7,398 respondents.⁶ The results for Ireland showed that 75% of 15–24-year-olds reported alcohol use in the previous 12 months

Table 2 Frequency of drinking - by age (%) HI, 2024

	Total	15-24
Past 12 months	73	75
At least once per month	60	63
At least once per week	38	30
Multiple times per week	22	13

Men aged between 15 and 24 (50%) are the group most likely to binge drink on a typical drinking occasion, remaining the group most likely to do so since 2023 (48%). This compares with 26% of women of the same age (24% in 2023).

Table 3 Binge drinking on a typical drinking occasion - by age and gender (%), HI 2024

	Total	15-24
Total	28	38
Men	42	50
Woman	14	26

Data from the GUI the lives of 20-year-olds⁷, shows the vast majority of young adults (96%) had consumed alcohol by the age of 20, increasing from 90 per cent at age 17/18. The average age for having their first full alcoholic drink was 16. Amongst those 20-year-olds who had ever drank alcohol, 22 per cent drank monthly, 49 per cent drank two to four times per month, 22 per cent drank two to three times per week, 3 per cent drank 4+ times per week and just 3 per cent never drank.

How many young people receive treatment for alcohol and drug use?

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

Unpublished data from the NDTRS shows that in 2023, 62 (0.8%) cases aged under 18 were in treatment for alcohol as a main problem drug. This has decreased from 109 (1.5%) in 2017.

62 cases entered alcohol treatment under the age of 18 in 2023.^a

Of these:

- 34 (44.7%) were male.
- 11 (14.5%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 37 (47.8%) use more than one drug.
- 67 (88.2%) were new cases and 9 (11.8%) were previously treated.

463 cases entered alcohol treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2023.

Of these:

- 363 (65.4%) were male.
- 223 (48.2%) use more than one drug.
- 287 (62.0%) were new cases and 162 (35.0%) were previously treated.

657 cases entered drug treatment under the age of 18 in 2023.

Of these:

- The majority, 562 (85.5%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.
- 490 (74.6%) were male.
- 173 (26.3%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 263 (40.0%) use more than one drug.
- 546 (83.1%) were new cases.

1,881 cases entered drug treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2023.

Of these:

^aThe 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. Note: Cases are episodes of treatment not individuals, which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the data; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

- The majority, 836 (44.4%), were in treatment for cocaine as their main problem drug.
- 1,404 (74.6%) were male.
- 1,134 (60.3%) use more than one drug.
- 1,434 (76.2%) were new cases and 317 (16.9%) were previously treated.

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status, treatment status, frequency of use) up to 2023 see library [interactive tables](#)]

How many young people die from using alcohol and drugs?

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. NDRDI data shows that there was a total of 86 drug and/or alcohol related deaths among persons aged 24 years or younger in 2017 (Table 3) (unpublished data from the NDRDI).

Table 4 Number of drug poisoning deaths among persons aged 24 years or under, by sex, NDRDI 2021*

2021	Male	Female
Poisoning	15	~

*Excludes deaths due to alcohol poisoning only (i.e. without any other drug implicated)

~Less than five deaths.

What does the law say about underage drinking?

Intoxicating Liquor Acts

- It is an offence to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18.
- It is an offence to buy alcohol for people under the age of 18.
- It is also an offence to give alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 unless in a domestic home and they have parental consent.

See more at [Citizens Information](#)

The [Public Health \(Alcohol\) Act 2018](#) aims to reduce alcohol consumption in Ireland to 9.1 litres per person per annum by 2020 and to reduce the harms associated with alcohol. The Act consists of 29 sections and includes five main provisions. These are: minimum unit pricing; health labelling of alcohol products; the regulation of advertising and sponsorship of alcohol products; structural separation of alcohol products in mixed trading outlets; and the regulation of the sale and supply of alcohol in certain circumstances.

References

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Further reading:

- Brennan M M, Corrigan C, Mongan D, Doyle, A *et al.* (2024) [Predictors and outcomes of adolescent alcohol and drug use: a scoping review](#). Dublin: Health Research Board and Trinity College Dublin
- Doyle, A Sunday, S Galvin B and Mongan D (2022) [Alcohol and other drug use among children and young people in Ireland: prevalence, risk and protective factors, consequences, responses, and policies](#). Dublin: Health Research Board

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