

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



August 2023

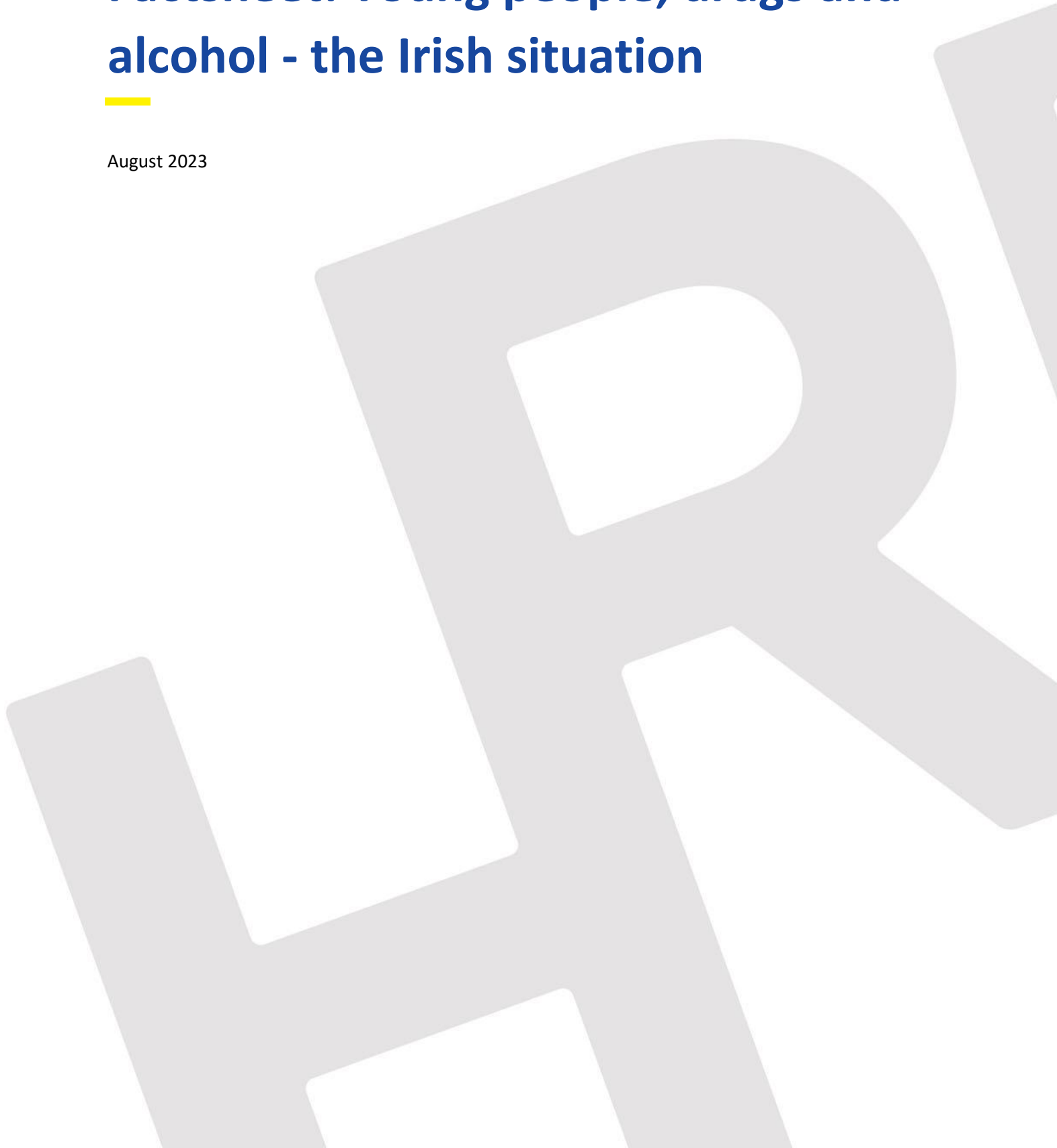


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Glossary of terms

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.

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.

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.

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 Children^{1,2}

In 2018, Ireland participated for the sixth time in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children¹ [HBSC](#) study. The survey included 15,557 school-children from 8 to 18 years old; 255 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated. Among other health indicators, data were collected on smoking and the use of alcohol and other substances.

ESPAD- European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs³

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 study⁴

[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 2019.⁵

NDAS- National drug and alcohol survey⁶

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. 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.⁶

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.

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 over the five general population surveys (NDAS).⁶

Table 1 Last year illicit drug use by 15-24-year-olds, by year (%), NDAS

	2002–3	2006–7	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Any illegal drug	12.7	15.4	15.1	18.7	18.5
Cannabis	11.0	13.1	12.9	16.2	14.5
Ecstasy	2.8	2.8	1.1	6.7	7.2
Cocaine	2.7	3.8	2.5	3.2	4.6
Poppers	0.9	1.2	0.2	2.1	4.6
M Mushrooms	1.1	1.9	1.0	1.6	0.6
Amphetamines	1.2	0.8	1.5	0.5	2.4
LSD	0.2	0.2	0.9	0.8	2.4
Methadone	0.2	0	0.3	0.4	0.0
Heroin	0.2	0	0.3	0.1	0.0
Solvents	0.2	0.0	0.6	0.5	0.0

Figure 1 shows illicit drug use for young people compared to all ages in the most recent NDAS 2019–20. Use of any illegal drug in the last year is highest amongst the 15-to-24 age group (18.5%).⁶

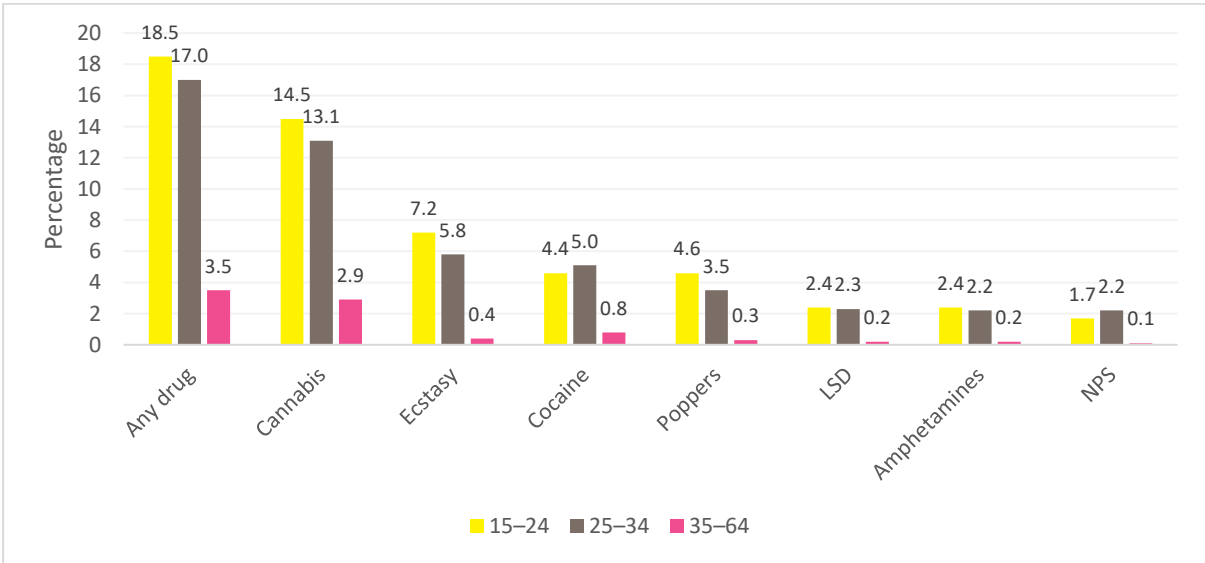


Figure 1: Percentage of those reporting illegal drug use in the last year by age group, 2019-20, NDAS

Cannabis

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

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.⁶ The results for Ireland for those aged 15-24 showed that:

- Cannabis use has increased from 11% in 2002–3 to 14.5% in 2019–20 (Table 1)
- Those aged 15 to 24 are the most likely to have used cannabis in the last year (14.5%) (Figure 1).

- There has been a decrease in last year use among males aged 15–24 years since 2014–15, from 21.5% to 16.3%.
- Among females aged 15–24 years, last year use has increased from 6.8% in 2002–03 to 12.8% in 2019–20.

In the most recent 2018 HBSC study, based on children aged 10 to 17, 8% of boys and 6% of girls report cannabis use in the last 12 months. Boys and older children are more likely to report cannabis use in the last 12 months.¹

Between 1998 and 2018 there was a small decrease in the percentage of girls who reported cannabis use in the last 12 months, and a moderate decrease for boys. The decrease is most evident among younger children and children in higher social class groups.²

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%).³

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 study⁵ 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 survey³ 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%).

Between 1998 and 2018 there was a moderate decrease in the percentage of girls who reported having ever been drunk, and there was a large decrease for boys.²

Between 2002 and 2018 there was a large decrease in the percentage of 15-17-year-old girls and boys who reported that they were 13 or younger when they had their first alcoholic drink. The decrease is evident across all social class groups.²

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland.⁶ The results for Ireland showed that:

- The median age at which 15–24-year-olds initiated alcohol consumption has increased from 16 years to 17 years since 2002–03.
- Young males were most likely to have hazardous or harmful drinking patterns. Among male drinkers aged 15–24 years, 63.1% engage in monthly heavy episodic drinking (HED) and 37.0% had an alcohol use disorder (AUD).
- The highest prevalence of AUD was observed among female drinkers aged 15–24 years (38.0%).
- While young people drank less frequently than those in older age groups, they consumed more alcohol per typical drinking occasion, with 45.5% of 15–24-year-olds consuming at least six standard drinks per drinking occasion.
- This level of consumption was almost twice as common among 15–24-year-old males (58.4%) than 15–24-year-old females (31.3%).

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 2022, 76 (1.0%) cases aged under 18 were in treatment for alcohol as a main problem drug. This has decreased from 124 (1.6%) in 2016.

76 cases entered alcohol treatment under the age of 18 in 2022.^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.

443 cases entered alcohol treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2022.

Of these:

- 326 (73.6%) were male.
- 216 (48.8%) use more than one drug.

^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.

- 287 (64.8%) were new cases and 147 (33.2%) were previously treated.

616 cases entered drug treatment under the age of 18 in 2022.

Of these:

- The majority, 520 (84.4%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.
- 474 (76.9%) were male.
- 123 (20.0%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 280 (45.5%) use more than one drug.
- 495 (80.4%) were new cases.

1,921 cases entered drug treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2022.

Of these:

- The majority, 768 (40.0%), were in treatment for cocaine as their main problem drug.
- 1,467 (76.4%) were male.
- 1,090 (56.7%) use more than one drug.
- 1,173 (61.1%) were new cases and 681 (35.5%) were previously treated.

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status, treatment status, frequency of use) up to 2021 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 3: Number of NDRDI* deaths by gender among persons aged 24 years or younger, in 2017

2017	Male	Female
Poisoning	15	~
Non poisoning	26	12

*These deaths do not include deaths among those known to be 'alcohol dependent only' (i.e. no history of drug misuse) who died of non-poisoning death.

~Less than five deaths.

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

The [National Self-Harm Registry Ireland](#) is a national system of population monitoring for the occurrence of hospital-treated self-harm.⁷ Data was collected from hospital emergency departments on patients aged from 10 to 29 years. Intentional drug overdose was most common among 15–19-year-olds (58.7% for males, 71.6% for females). While rare as a sole method of self-harm, alcohol was present among those aged 20–24 years for both males (37.5%) and females (33.1%). Between 2007 and 2016 the rate of self-harm in young people aged 10–24 years increased by 22%.

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.

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Further reading:

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