

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

September 2020

Introduction

Information for this factsheet was obtained from various sources. Studies may report on different age groups and these are noted in the text. This factsheet includes key Irish research on young people up to the age of 24. This factsheet will be updated as new data is published.

Key research on drug use by 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

In 2018, Ireland participated for the sixth time in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children [HBSC](#) study¹. 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 Drugs²

The sixth European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs [ESPAD](#) survey² was undertaken in 35 European countries during 2014/15 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. 2,036 questionnaires were completed by young people from 50 randomly selected post-primary schools in Ireland.

GUI- Growing up in Ireland study³

[Growing Up in Ireland](#) is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland³. A group (cohort) of children were recruited at 9 years of age, subsequently interviewed at 13 and, most recently, at 17/18 years.

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 Growing Up in Ireland's older Cohort '98 between August 2018 and June 2019.⁴

GPS- General population survey⁵

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 alcohol⁴. There have been

4 surveys to date. Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+^a 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).

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 4 general population surveys.⁵

Table 1 Illicit drug use by 15-24 year-olds, by year (%), General Population Survey

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

Figure 1 shows illicit drug use for young people compared to all ages in the most recent GPS 2014/15. Last year use of any illegal drug is highest amongst the 15 to 24 age group (18.7%).⁵

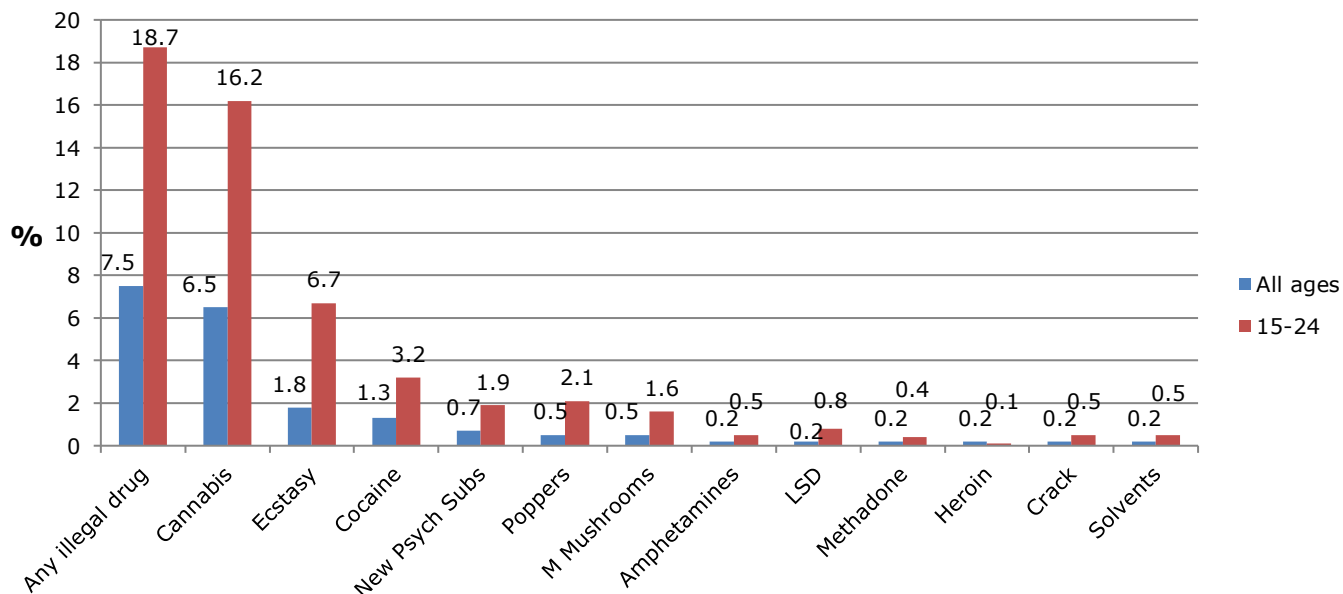


Figure 1: Percentage of those reporting illegal drug use in the last year by age, 2014/15, NACDA

^a In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years.

Cannabis

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

In the most recent HBSC study 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 months¹.

The ESPAD study of 15-16 year old students also asked how many times in their lives they had used cannabis. Male students (22.4%) were more likely than females (15.5%) to have ever tried cannabis. Overall, 19% of students had ever tried cannabis, of these most had tried it once or twice. There was also a sizeable minority of students who smoked cannabis 40 times or more (3.9%)².

In the growing up in Ireland study the majority (70%) of 17-18 year olds reported that they had never used cannabis.³ 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.

A recent key findings report⁴ presents findings on the lives of 20-year-olds.

The findings show:

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'.

The 2014/15 general population survey involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland).⁵ The results for Ireland for those aged 15 to 24 showed that:

- Cannabis use has increased from 11% in 2002/3 to 16.2% in 2014/15 (Table 1)
- Those aged 15 to 24 are the most likely to have used cannabis in the last year (16.2%) (Figure 1).
- Use among males of this age (25.4%) is considerably higher than females of the same age (12%).

Alcohol

How many young people drink alcohol in the Republic of Ireland?

In the most recent HBSC survey:¹

- 64% of children report that they have never had an alcoholic drink (58% in 2014).
- 17% of children report that they have had an alcoholic drink in the last 30 days (20% in 2014).
- 17% of children report having been 'really drunk' (21% in 2014).
- Girls are more likely to report having been 'really drunk'.

The most common source of alcohol among 12 to 17 year olds was from a parent or guardian or from a friend.

- Girls are more likely to report sourcing alcohol from their friends.
- Those aged under 15 are more likely to report sourcing alcohol at home.

The most common location for alcohol consumption among 12 to 17 year olds was at someone else's home or their own home.

Alcohol use within the last 30 days (current use) among students in Ireland has declined over time according to the ESPAD study (Table 2), with a 28% reduction since 2011 and a 48% reduction over the past 20 years.²

Table 2: Lifetime alcohol consumption among 15-16 year-olds by gender, ESPAD

Lifetime alcohol consumption	Female		Male		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Never	172	24.7%	206	28.0%	378	26.4%
Once or twice	140	20.1%	142	19.3%	282	19.7%
3 to 5 times	107	15.4%	85	11.5%	192	13.4%
6 to 9 times	88	12.6%	84	11.4%	172	12.0%
10 to 19 times	82	11.8%	96	13.0%	178	12.4%
20 to 39 times	56	8.0%	44	6.0%	100	7.0%
40 times or more	52	7.5%	79	10.7%	131	9.1%
Total	697	100.0%	756	100.0%	1433	100.0%

In the growing up in Ireland study the majority (90%) of 17–18 year-olds reported having consumed alcohol at some stage in their lives.³ Using a screening tool developed to identify alcohol problems, 5% of the 17/18-year-olds reported drinking behaviour that would be classified as high or very high-risk, with 31% that would be classified as risky or hazardous.

96% of 20-year-olds reported that they had 'ever consumed alcohol', while 93% overall reported that they currently drank.⁴ Among those that currently drank, 3% had tried to give up alcohol at some stage, while a further 22% had tried to reduce the amount of alcohol they consume; 93% of those who had tried to give up or reduce their alcohol consumption were successful in their efforts.

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 2019, 111 (1.4%) cases aged 18 years or under were in treatment for alcohol as a main problem drug. This has decreased from 220 (2.8%) in 2013.

111 cases entered alcohol treatment under the age of 18 in 2019^b.

Of these:

- Cannabis 51 (45.9%) was the most common additional drug among those treated.
- 55 (49.5%) were male.
- 18 (16.2%) were referred to treatment by social services.

- 54 (48.6%) use more than one drug.
- 89 (80.2%) were new cases and 12 (10.8%) were previously treated.

551 cases entered alcohol treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2019.

Of these:

- Cannabis 186 (33.8%) was the most common additional drug among those treated.
- 409 (74.2%) were male.
- 268 (48.6%) use more than one drug.
- 356 (64.6%) were new cases and 122 (22.1%) were previously treated.

851 cases entered drug treatment under the age of 18 in 2019^b.

Of these:

- The majority, 723 (85.0%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.
- Alcohol was the most common additional drug among those treated (238, 28.0%).
- 683 (80.3%) were male.
- 180 (21.2%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 414 (48.6%) use more than one drug.
- 640 (75.2%) were new cases.

2,301 cases entered drug treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2019.

Of these:

- The majority, 913 (39.7%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.
- Cannabis was also the most common additional drug among those treated (588, 25.6%).
- 1,847 (80.3%) were male.
- 1,335 (58.0%) use more than one drug.
- 1,264 (54.9%) were new cases and 872 (37.9%) were previously treated.

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status, treatment status, frequency of use) up to 2018 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

^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.

*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.⁶ 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.

For more information please refer to the following sources:

1. Kolto, A Gavin, A Molcho, M Kelly, C Walker, L and Nic Gabhainn, S (2020) [The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children \(HBSC\) study 2018](#). Dublin: Department of Health and National University of Ireland, Galway.
2. Taylor, Keishia and Babineau, Kate and Keogan, Sheila and Whelan, Ellen and Clancy, Luke (2016) [ESPAD 2015: European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs in Ireland](#). Dublin: Department of Health.
3. Economic and Social Research Institute, Trinity College Dublin. (2020) [Growing up in Ireland: the Lives of 17/18-year-olds](#) Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
4. Economic and Social Research Institute, Trinity College Dublin. (2019) [Growing Up in Ireland. Wave 4 at 20-years](#). Dublin: Economic and Social Research Institute.
5. National Advisory Committee on Drugs & Public Health Information and Research Branch (2016) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland & drug use in Northern Ireland](#). Bulletin 1. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.
6. Griffin Eve, McMahon Elaine, McNicholas Fiona, Corcoran Paul, Perry Ivan J and Arensman Ella (2018) [Increasing rates of self-harm among children, adolescents and young adults: a 10-](#)

[year national registry study 2007-2016](#). *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 53, (7), pp. 663-671.

Further reading:

- Department of Health. (2019) [Healthy Ireland survey 2019 summary of findings](#). Dublin: Stationery Office.
- HRB National Drugs Library [prevalence page](#)

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