**Health Research Board publish latest drug-related deaths figures**

**EMBARGO Tuesday 12 December 00.01** Almost two people died each day in Ireland during 2015 as a result of poisoning, trauma or medical causes linked to drug use according to the latest figures from the Health Research Board (HRB). This represents almost 20,000 potential life years lost\* in just one year. A total of 695 people died in 2015 compared to 431 in 2004 - this represents an increase of 61%. There have been 7,422 deaths among people who use drugs since 2004.

According to Dr Mairead O Driscoll, Interim Chief Executive at the HRB,

‘The number of deaths involving prescription drugs or cocktails of different drugs remains high. Mixing drugs increases the risk of death, which is clearly reflected in these figures. This year we continue to see an increase in the number of poisonings from cocaine’.

‘While the number of deaths from alcohol decreased slightly this year, alcohol remains the number one drug implicated in deaths, alone or with other drugs, over the reporting period. Alcohol was implicated in almost one-in-three poisoning deaths during 2015’.

The Health Research Board reports on ***poisonings deaths*** *(also known as overdose )* which are due to the toxic effect of a drug, or combination of drugs, and on ***non-poisonings*** which are deaths as a result of trauma, such as hanging, or medical reasons, such as cardiac events, among people who use drugs.

**Key findings – all deaths 2015**

* There were 695 deaths in 2015, slightly lower than the number reported in 2014 (719).
* Many of these deaths were premature – half of all deaths in 2015 were aged 41 years or younger.
* 20,000 potential life years were lost\* because of drug-related deaths.
* Almost three-in-four (503) of all deaths were male.
* A total of 8% (54) of all NDRDI deaths were among injectors and 52% (28) of injectors died in Dublin City.

***Poisoning deaths in 2015***

* The number of poisoning deaths decreased from 364 in 2014, to 348 in 2015. **Prescription drugs** were implicated in 232, or two in every three, poisoning deaths.
  + Benzodiazepines were the most common prescription drug group implicated.
  + Diazepam (a benzodiazepine) was the most common single prescription drug implicated in 101 (29%) of all poisonings.
  + Pregabalin related deaths (an anti-epileptic drug which is also prescribed for chronic pain and some anxiety conditions) increased by 69%, from 26 deaths in 2014, to 44 in 2015.
* **Alcohol** was implicated in 107 deaths in 2015, compared to 117 deaths in 2014. Alcohol was implicated in one-in-three of all poisonings and alcohol alone was responsible for 14% of all poisoning deaths.
* **Cocaine**-related deaths have increased 110% since 2010 from 21 in 2010, to 44 in 2015.
* **Opiates** were the main drug group implicated in poisonings.
  + Heroin was implicated in 82 deaths in 2015 compared to 94 in 2014.
  + Methadone was implicated in a quarter of poisonings (86, 25%).

***Focus on polydrug use “drug cocktails”***

* Polydrug use is a significant risk factor for fatal overdose.
* In 2004, 44% or 118 deaths were due to a cocktail of drugs, with an average of two drugs taken. In 2015 this had risen to 64% or 222 deaths, with an average of four different drugs taken.
* 56% of deaths where alcohol was implicated involved other drugs, mainly benzodiazepines.
* 91% of deaths where methadone was implicated involved other drugs, mainly benzodiazepines.
* 71% of deaths where heroin was implicated involved other drugs, mainly benzodiazepines.
* Almost all deaths (93%) where cocaine was implicated involved other drugs.

***Non-poisoning deaths in 2015***

The number of non-poisoning deaths fell slightly with 347 deaths in 2015 compared to 355 in 2014. Non-poisoning deaths are categorised as being due to either trauma (156 deaths) or medical causes (191 deaths).

* The main causes of non-poisoning deaths categorised as trauma were hanging (83, 24%) and categorised as medical were cardiac events (55, 16%).
* Three- in-five (59%) people who died as a result of hanging had a history of mental health problems.
* The median age for deaths due to medical causes has increased from 38 years in 2004, to 49 years in 2015, which may indicate an ageing cohort of drug users in Ireland.

Commenting on the data, Ms Ena Lynn, Research Officer at the Health Research Board said,

‘These statistics give us just some insight into the impact that drug use has on people and society. We should not lose sight of the fact that each one of these stats is a life lost and a life cut short.’

The full report is available to download from the HRB website at [www.hrb.ie/publications](http://www.hrb.ie/publications) and www.drugsandalcohol.ie /28086. An infographic that outlines key data is also available for download.

\* Potential life years lost was calculated by looking at the age of individuals who died in 2015 and what their life expectancy would have been based on their year of birth.

Note: The 2015 figures are likely to be revised upwards when new data become available from closed inquest files.

**ENDS**

**For further information, or to organise interviews with experts, please contact:**

Gillian Markey - Communications Manager, Health Research Board

**m** 087 2288514 **e** [gmarkey@hrb.ie](mailto:gmarkey@hrb.ie)

The Health Research Board (HRB) is the lead agency supporting and funding health research in Ireland. We manage five health information systems in the areas of alcohol and drug use, disability and mental health and generate evidence for health policy. Our aim is to improve people's health, build health research capacity and underpin developments in health service delivery.