

Media brief

Health Research Board compares the Irish drug situation with the rest of Europe

The [European drug report 2020: trends and developments](#) report provides a snapshot of the latest drug trends across the 27 EU member states, Norway and Turkey. The Health Research Board (HRB) provides the Irish data and research for the EMCDDA report.

This media brief is designed to highlight key points from the European report and, where the data are available, provide a comparison with the situation in Ireland.

Europe is seeing signs of an increase in synthetic drug production, including new synthetic opioids and ecstasy tablets containing high levels of MDMA. The report notes that, while COVID-19 has only marginally disrupted drug supplies, innovative distribution models developed during lockdown may cause problems in the future.

The analysis of data supplied by monitoring centres in the 27 EU member states and Norway and Turkey show:

- An increase in the number of large seizures of cocaine, cannabis resin and heroin.
- A total of 181 tonnes of cocaine were seized during 2019.
- Cocaine purity is increasing and more first-time entrants into drug treatment programmes are seeking help for problems with cocaine use.
- Cannabis resin and herb are now around twice as strong as they were a decade ago.
- MDMA products are increasing in strength and the scale of synthetic drug production in Europe is continuing to increase.
- Seizures of heroin have doubled, with some heroin now being produced in Europe. Drug overdose is increasingly associated with those over 50 as the population of those who use heroin age.

The European Drug Report describes the innovative response of services throughout Europe to the disruption caused by COVID-19, and the decline in the use of some drugs mainly associated with social settings, such as MDMA and cocaine.

The **Minister of State for Public Health, Wellbeing and the National Drugs Strategy, Frank Feighan TD**, said: 'The latest European drug report highlights the serious challenges created by illicit drugs and the overall strength of substances including high potency cannabis. As Minister with responsibility for the National Drug Strategy I am committed to strengthening early harm reduction responses to current and emerging trends and patterns of drug use in Ireland.'

Minster Feighan added ‘I also note that the report reviews the impact of the pandemic on drug use and the most vulnerable in society, which is an issue we have become very familiar with. I say this as part of Ireland’s response to COVID 19 specific resource documents were developed to ensure that all people in receipt of opioid substitute treatment could continue safely with their treatment during the pandemic. I am also pleased to note that despite the major difficulties caused by the pandemic an additional 755 people were brought into opioid substitution treatment services, representing an increase of 7 per cent nationally. This was an amazing achievement considering the difficulties involved.’

EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel says: ‘The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immediate, disruptive impact on drug use, supply and services and has highlighted the special needs of people who use drugs. While we will need to assess the long-term impact of the pandemic, in the short-term we already see that large-scale drug trafficking has been largely unaffected and digitally enabled drug markets have become more popular. As the economic repercussions of the crisis take effect, some in our communities may become more vulnerable to drug problems and drug market involvement, putting greater pressure on our already stretched services. It is essential therefore that we identify early, and act rapidly and effectively to, address the new threats that may emerge from this fast-evolving situation.’

Comparison of the EU and Irish drug situation

Cocaine

European situation

- Around 3 million young adults (15–34 years) have used cocaine in the last year across Europe. Of the 27 countries that undertook prevalence surveys between 2015 and 2018, eight reported prevalence rates of more than 2.5%.
- There were 34,000 first-time entrants to drug treatment services with cocaine as a main problem drug, with 22 countries reporting an increase in this category.
- An estimated 10,600 clients entered treatment for crack cocaine use in 2016. Many of these clients report heroin as a secondary problem drug and they tend to be more socially marginalised than those in treatment for the use of powder cocaine.
- An estimated 59,500 clients entering drug treatment in Europe (15% of all treatment entrants) reported using cocaine in combination with heroin or other opioids.

Irish comparison

- In Ireland the most recent general population survey in 2014-15 shows that 2.9 per cent of 15–34-year olds used cocaine in the last year which had not changed since the 2010/11 survey. This is lower than the corresponding figure for the UK (4.7%), the Netherlands (4.5%) and roughly the same as Denmark, Spain and France. Eight countries reported last year prevalence of cocaine use among young adults of 2.5% or more.

- Cocaine became the second most common main problem drug reported in 2019, when 2560 cases entered treatment. It had ranked third behind opioids and cannabis between 2015 and 2018. The proportion of cocaine cases increased from 7.9% in 2013 to 24.0% in 2019.
- Cocaine was implicated in 53 deaths in Ireland in 2017, an increase of 26% on the 2016 figure.
- In 2019, crack cocaine accounted for 14.3% of all cases treated for cocaine as a main problem (compared to 11.3% in 2018).

Cannabis: availability and use

European situation

- Cannabis is most commonly used illicit drug in Europe, across all age groups.
- The EMCDDA estimates that 15% of young adults (15–34 years) – an estimated 18 million people - used cannabis in the last year. Last year prevalence in this age group ranged from 3.5 % in Hungary to 21.8% in France. Among 15–24-year-olds the last year prevalence of cannabis use in Europe is 19%.
- Cannabis is responsible for the greatest share of new entrants to treatment. The overall number of people entering treatment for the first time and who are seeking treatment for problem cannabis use increased by 62% between 2006 and 2018, when 80,000 entered treatment.
- In 2018, there were 760,000 seizures of cannabis products reported in the European Union, including 21,000 seizures of cannabis plant.

Irish comparison

- The 2014/15 general population survey reported that 14% of young adults (15-34 years) used cannabis in the year prior to the survey, approaching the European average of 14.4%. This is the same prevalence as the European average for this age group and below that of Spain (19%) and France (22%), but slightly above that of the UK (11%).
- Cannabis was the main problem drug for 2502 cases (23.5% of all cases) entering drug treatment in Ireland in 2019. Cannabis was the most common main problem drug reported by new cases (37.8%) in 2019.
- The 2014/15 ESPAD survey reported that 18.9% of 15–16-year-old students had used cannabis during their lifetime. This places Ireland slightly above the EU average of 16.5%.
- Cannabis herb was the most prominent drug in Ireland in 2019 and has been since 2010. Overall, in 2019, there were 3,691 seizures of cannabis type substances (including cannabis herb, resin, and plants) submitted for analysis, this was over double the number seized and analysed in 2018 (1,640 seizures).

New psychoactive substances

European situation

- Data on new psychoactive substances (NPS) are based on notifications by Member States to the EU Early Warning System (EWS). In 2019, 53 new substances were reported for the first time (55 in 2018). By the

end of 2019, the **EMCDDA** was monitoring more than 790 NPS, compared with around 300 monitored in 2013.

- The number of new substances being identified for the first time each year increased sharply between 2009, when 24 were identified, and 2014 when there were 101 notifications, but has since declined with 53 identified in 2019.
- Since 2015 approximately 400 different substance have been detected each year. So while the number of new substances is decreasing there is an enormous number of new drugs in circulation.
- There were approximately 64,800 seizures of NPS, as reported to the EU Early Warning System.
- Synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones were the most frequently seized new psychoactive substances in 2018, accounting for 77% of all NPS seized. In recent years there has been a decline in seizures of powders containing these drugs. However, the number cathinone production sites in Europe has increased.
- In 2018, eight new synthetic opioids were detected for the first time. Only two of these were fentanyl, in contrast to the pattern since 2009.
- Production of MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is concentrated in Belgium and The Netherlands but police also discovered laboratories in Sweden and Spain in 2018.
- The EMCDDA estimates that 2.3 million young adults (15–34 years), or 1.9% of this age group used MDMA/ecstasy in the last year. National estimates vary considerably with the Netherlands highest at 6.9%. Prevalence estimates for those aged 15-24 years are higher, with 2.4 % (1.2 million) estimated to have used MDMA in the last year.

Irish comparison

- In 2010 more than 200 individual substances were controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 and the Criminal Justice (psychoactive substances) Act 2010 was passed to prohibit supply of harmful NPS. While the court of appeal effectively annulled earlier declaration orders banning numerous substances, the Misuse of Drug (Amendment) Act 2015 was introduced to control these substances in Ireland.
- The 2014/15 general population survey reported last-year prevalence of MDMA of 4.4% for young adults (aged 15-34 years), a significant increase from 0.9% recorded in the 2010/11 survey.
- MDMA (alone or with other drugs) was implicated in 14 poisoning deaths in 2017, up from eight in 2016.
- Synthetic drugs are not produced in Ireland, nor are general illicit drugs tableted. Ireland is viewed as an end source not a transit country. However, the market is constantly changing; pre-precursors such as alpha-phenylacetonitrile (APAAN) and benzyl cyanide, and precursors such as piperonyl methyl ketone (PMK) and benzyl methyl ketone (BMK), have been detected in Ireland in the past number of years.

Opioids (mainly heroin)

European situation

- There were an estimated 1.3 million high-risk opioid users in Europe in 2018.

- In 2018, use of opioids was reported as the main reason for entering specialised drug treatment by 138,000 clients or 33% of all those entering drug treatment in Europe. Of these, 27 000 were first-time entrants, a drop of 5,000 compared with the previous year. The number of first-time heroin clients more than halved from a peak in 2007.
- Overall, non-heroin opioids account for 16 % of all clients citing an opioid as their main problem drug. In some countries, non-heroin opioids represent the most common form of opioid use among entrants to specialised treatment.
- It is estimated that at least 8,300 overdose deaths, mainly involving opioids, occurred in the EU in 2018. As in previous years, the United Kingdom (36%) and Germany (14%) together account for nearly half of the European total.

Irish comparison

- A prevalence estimate of opioid use in the Republic of Ireland in 2014, calculated using an analysis of four data sources, was between 18,720 and 21,454.
- The estimates of prevalence of opioid use for Dublin in 2014 were 13,458 opioid users. The corresponding figures for 2006, the previous time the study was done, were 14,909. The prevalence for the rest of Ireland (excluding Dublin) was estimated to be 5,530, also a slight decrease from 2006.
- There were 4133 cases opiates (mainly heroin) treatment cases in 2019 and it remains were the most common main problem drug reported by cases entering treatment. As a proportion of all cases treated, opioids decreased year-on-year from 51.4% in 2013 to 38.8% in 2019.
- Between 2007 and 2010 opiates (mainly heroin) were the main problem drug reported by new entrants, but opiates were superseded by cannabis in 2011, and this trend continues with 17.0% new cases in 2019 reporting heroin use, and 37.8% reporting cannabis use.
- Methadone (alone or with another drug) was implicated in 25% of poisoning deaths in 2017 and continues to be the opiate most commonly associated with poisoning deaths. There were 95 deaths in 2017 and 103 in 2016 where methadone was implicated, compared to 89 deaths in 2015 and 105 in 2014. The peak in recent years was in 2011 when there were 116 deaths where methadone was implicated.
- In 2017 there were 77 deaths where heroin was implicated, compared to 74 in 2016. Fentanyl was implicated in seven poisoning deaths in 2017, the same as in 2015 and 2016.
- Following a peak in 2014, the number of seizures of opioids continued to decline year on year, with the number of seizures in 2017 (765) being approximately 59% lower than in 2014.

Journalists can access the *European Drug Report 2020* and all related documents at the following link.

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2020>

ENDS

If you have any queries in relation to the Irish figures, you can contact:

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Notes to Editors

- The most recent Irish household study estimating the prevalence of drug use in Ireland was undertaken in 2015. A new survey has recently been completed and the results of this will be published early in 2021.
- The Irish drug treatment data referred to above is taken from reports on those entering treatment in 2019. The most recent year for which drug-related deaths estimates are available is 2017.
- In 2019 the Department of Health reconstituted the Early Warning and Emerging Trends network to advise the government and exchange information on new psychoactive substances, emerging drug trends or practices and the consequences of such use.