



European Schools Project on Alcohol & other Drugs

ESPAD 2019 SUMMARY

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for the Department of Health

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Executive Summary

The European Schools Project for Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) Survey collects comparable data on substance use among European students aged 15 and 16 years in order to monitor trends in alcohol and drug use, as well as gambling, gaming and internet use within and between countries and groups of countries. To date, Ireland has participated in seven data-collection waves that have been conducted across 39 countries in Europe. In the Irish 2019 data-collection wave, a total of 1949 students aged 15-16 years old (born in 2003), from a stratified random sample of 50 post-primary schools, completed a questionnaire on issues including alcohol use, cigarette smoking and e-cigarette use, cannabis and other illegal drug use, gambling, gaming, and internet use.

This report presents key findings from the 2019 ESPAD survey in Ireland and provides information on prevalence of substance use (alcohol, cigarettes, e-cigarettes, illicit drugs, inhalants and new psychoactive substances), perceived availability of substances, age of initiation of substance use, and prevalence of internet use, gaming and gambling. Associated factors including gender, social class, familial and peer variables are also examined for each behaviour.

In relation to alcohol, 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. Among boys, the most popular alcoholic drinks were beer (36%) and cider (32%) while, among girls, spirits (32%) and cider (25%) were the most popular. As in previous surveys, age 15 years (52%) was the most common age at which students first drank alcohol, followed by age 14 (28%). 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%). Asked about consequences of alcohol use, damaging or losing property was the most frequently reported (10%), followed by serious argument (7%) and injury/accident (7%). 3% reported unwanted sexual attention as a negative outcome of alcohol, representing about 60 young people, more girls than boys. Since 1995, when Ireland first participated in ESPAD, there has been a significant reduction in alcohol consumption among students aged 15-16 years. However, our trend analyses in this wave indicate that, since 2015, there has been a slight increase in current alcohol use and also in heavy episodic drinking.

Smoking remains a notable issue for adolescents. 32% of respondents had tried smoking and 14% were current smokers, with 5% smoking daily. Again, the majority (63%) of students reported starting to smoke at age 14 or 15. Equally, the majority (61%) reported that it was easy to access cigarettes. Smoking was associated with truancy and lower grades, as well as with perceived relative wealth, lower parental education, parental monitoring, parental rule setting, parental support, relationship with parents, and also peer use of smoking, alcohol, cannabis and other substances. Our trend analyses showed that, despite a

reduction of over two-thirds since 1995 (the second largest decline of any of the seven major indicators of the ESPAD survey in Ireland), slightly more students reported smoking in 2019 than in 2015, and this was pronounced for boys.

Of concern were the numbers of adolescents reporting e-cigarette use. Because of their recency in the Irish market, this is only the second time that respondents to ESPAD were questioned about e-cigarettes. More students report using e-cigarettes in 2019 than in 2015, and the use of e-cigarettes among students is now more common than cigarette smoking. Almost four in 10 students (39%) had tried e-cigarettes and almost one in 5 (18%) were current users, making both ever-use and current use of e-cigarettes higher than use of combustible cigarettes. As with smoking, boys (46%) were more likely than girls (33%) to have tried e-cigarettes and also to be current users (23% vs 14%). When asked about their reasons for trying e-cigarettes, two-thirds (66%) said that it was “out of curiosity” and 29% said that it was because their friends offered it. Only 3% said that it was “to stop smoking cigarettes”. This point was further reinforced when respondents were asked about their tobacco use when they first used an e-cigarette. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) had never smoked cigarettes, while 24% smoked occasionally, and only 9% smoked regularly.

Students were asked about their ever-use and current use of a range of illegal drugs and other substances. Cannabis was the most-used drug with almost one student in 5 (19%) having tried cannabis and almost one in 10 (9%) having used it in the previous 30 days. Boys were more likely than girls to be users, and girls were more likely to perceive risk in regular or occasional cannabis use. More boys (22%) than girls (13%) had also tried unsuccessfully to stop using cannabis. Early initiation into cannabis use was particularly evident with almost four out of 5 users (79%) having first tried cannabis at the age of 14 or 15 years. Access to cannabis was reported as fairly or very easy by 42% of students. Cannabis use was associated with socio-economic status, truancy and absenteeism, lower school grades, and lower parental monitoring.

Regarding other substance use, inhalants were the most commonly used substance (10% ever-use), with students also reporting use of painkillers (5%), alcohol with pills (4%), cocaine (3%), and ecstasy (3%), among others. Almost one in 5 students reported that access to cocaine and/or ecstasy was “easy”. We found that illicit substance use was associated with socio-economic status, truancy, lower school grades, low parental monitoring, and peer substance use. Our trend analyses showed that, between 2015 and 2019, there were no changes in the use of cannabis, inhalants and tranquilizers. However, we observed a decrease in the use of illicit drugs other than cannabis and, in fact, of all seven indicators (alcohol, smoking, etc.), it was in this area that the largest reduction occurred.

In relation to gambling, the majority (84%) of respondents had not gambled in the previous 12 months. Gambling is a particularly gendered activity, in terms of frequency, intensity and use of internet to gamble for money. More boys (23%) than girls (7%) reported that they had gambled in the previous 12 months. 12% of students gambled monthly or less, and 2% gambled more than twice a month. Betting on sports or

animals (horses, dogs) was the most common gambling activity (15%), followed by lotteries (12%), cards or dice (9%), and slot machines (8.4%). The Lie/Bet questionnaire, a two-question screening tool was used to evaluate problem gambling behaviour. Of those who had gambled in the previous 12 months (n=300), 26% reported that they had felt the need to bet more and more money, and 12% reported that they had to lie to people important to them about how much they gambled.

Students reported on their internet and gaming activities. More than a third of respondents (37%) spent 2-3 hours on social media on a typical school day, and even more (39%) spent more than 6 hours on social media on a typical non-school day. Significant gender differences were observed for non-school day internet use with girls (98%) spending more hours on social media than boys (96%) did. Almost two-thirds (64%) strongly or partly agreed that they spend too much time on social media and 57% agreed that their parents say they spend too much time on social media. Problem internet use was assessed with three item statements and a majority of students either strongly agreed (26%) or partly agreed (37%) that they spend too much time on social media, while a third (33%) strongly or partly agreed that they get in a bad mood when unable to spend time on social media. Regarding gaming, students were asked how many hours they spent playing games with other people using a computer, tablet, console, smartphone or other electronic device during the previous 30 days. 44% spent some time playing games on a school day and 56% spent some time playing games on a typical non-school day. About a fifth (20%) agreed that they spend too much time gaming and also that their parents (23%) say they spend too much time gaming. More boys (84%) than girls (29%) spent time playing games on a typical non-school day.

In the past 25 years, repeated ESPAD surveys of 15-16-year olds in Ireland have reported major reductions in alcohol consumption, smoking and the use of many substances. The largest reductions have been in the use of illicit drugs which, between 1995 and 2019, fell by 69% and in cigarette smoking which fell by 66%. In the same period there has been a 41% decrease in alcohol consumption and a 30% reduction in heavy episodic ['binge'] drinking. Observations regarding illicit drug use in the 1995-2019 time period are also positive suggesting a halt or even a reversal. There is cause for concern, however. Our trend analyses from 2015 to 2019 show that these declining figures have not continued for all substances and, in fact, have begun to increase again for some. Since 2015, increases have been observed in current alcohol use (14%), heavy episodic ['binge'] drinking (18%), current smoking (8%), and cannabis use (5%). Of particular note is the 50% rise in e-cigarette current use, suggesting that the popularity of e-cigarettes is on the rise among young people in Ireland. These results call for continued targeted high-intensity campaigns and education initiatives, as well as policy and legislative change to protect adolescent health.