HRB Bulletin
National Drug Treatment Reporting System

2014 – 2020
Drug Treatment Data

Cathy Kelleher, Anne Marie Carew, Suzi Lyons

Research. Evidence. Action.

HRB
Health Research Board

HRB StatLink Series 6

National Drug Treatment Reporting System 2014 – 2020 Drug Treatment Data

Cathy Kelleher, Anne Marie Carew and Suzi Lyons

Summary

In this bulletin, trends in **treated problem drug use** (excluding alcohol) are described for the seven-year period from 2014 to 2020. The data are drawn from the **National Drug Treatment Reporting System** (NDTRS), the national surveillance system that records and reports on cases of drug and alcohol treatment in Ireland.

NDTRS data for 2020 should be interpreted in the context of COVID-19. In 2020, there was an overall drop in the number of cases entering drug treatment which in part was the result of temporary service closures and measures introduced to comply with Covid-19 restrictions. This does not necessarily indicate a real decline in demand for treatment.

Overview

In the seven-year period, 68,571 cases were treated for problem drug use. The number of cases recorded decreased from 10,664 in 2019 to 9,702 in 2020, a drop of 9.0%

- The proportion of new cases was 38.2% in 2014 and 39.1% in 2020.

- In 2020, the majority of cases were treated in outpatient facilities (70.2%), as in previous years.

- Between 2019 and 2020, the number of cases treated in residential (inpatient) settings decreased by 24.3%.

Main problem drug (excluding alcohol)

- **Opioids** (mainly heroin) were the most common main problem drug in 2020. The proportion of cases treated for opioids decreased from 50.0% in 2014 to 36.7% in 2020.

- **Cocaine** was the second most common main problem drug reported in 2020. The proportion of cocaine cases increased from 8.6% in 2014 to 27.0% in 2020. Cocaine was the most common main drug among *new cases* in 2020. The proportion of new cases reporting cocaine as a main problem increased from 11.3% in 2014 to 35.8% in 2020.

- **Cannabis** was the third most common main problem drug reported in 2020. The proportion of cases treated decreased from 27.6% in 2014 to 21.9% in 2020. The proportion of new cases reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased from 44.9% in 2014 to 35.2% in 2020.

- **Benzodiazepines** were the main problem drug for 11.3% of cases in 2020, as compared to 9.6% of cases in 2014.

Polydrug use

- Over the period, the majority of cases reported **polydrug** use (58.0%).

- The proportion of cases with polydrug use decreased from 59.6% in 2014 to 53.4% in 2018, then increased to 58.6% in 2020.

- Cannabis (39.5%), cocaine (36.8%), benzodiazepines (36.5%), and alcohol (34.9%) were the most common **additional drugs** in 2020.

Risk behaviour

- The proportion of cases that had **ever injected** decreased from 35.7% in 2014 to 23.3% in 2020.

- In 2020, among cases who had injected, 37.8% had **shared needles and syringes**.

Socio-demographic characteristics

- The **median age** of cases increased from 29 years in 2014 to 31 years in 2020.

- Almost three-quarters (73.1%) of cases reported over the period were **male**.

- The proportion of cases recorded as **homeless** increased from 8.5% in 2014 to 10.5% in 2020.

- The proportion of cases with an **Irish Traveller** ethnicity was 3.2% in 2014 and 3.0% in 2020.

- The proportion of cases recorded as **unemployed** decreased from 64.4% in 2014 to 59.0% in 2020.

- The proportion of cases **in paid employment** increased from 8.3% in 2014 to 16.2% in 2020.

- In 2020, 13.8% of cases treated for problem drug use were **residing with children** aged 17 years or younger.

NDTRS cases 2014 to 2020

This bulletin presents NDTRS drug treatment data for the seven-year period from 2014 to 2020.[1] Data in this bulletin supersede all data previously published by the NDTRS.

The National Drug and Alcohol Strategy *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A Health Led Response to Drug and Alcohol Use in Ireland 2017−2025* requires all publicly funded drug and alcohol services to complete the NDTRS for all people who use services (action item 5.1.47). Included in the NDTRS are cases treated in all types of services: outpatient, inpatient, low threshold, general practitioners, and those treated in prison.[2]

NDTRS data for 2020 should be interpreted in the context of COVID-19. In 2020, there was an overall drop in the number of cases entering drug treatment which in part was the result of temporary service closures and measures introduced to comply with Covid-19 restrictions. This does not necessarily indicate a real decline in demand for treatment. High quality data are vital more than ever for measuring and understanding the impact of COVID-19 on addiction and addiction treatment in Ireland.[3,4]

Between 2014 and 2020, a total of 68,571 cases treated for problem drug use (excluding alcohol) were reported to the NDTRS.[5]

The number of treated cases recorded decreased from 9,890 in 2014 to 9,702 in 2020 **(Table 1)**. Between 2019 and 2020, the number of treated cases decreased by 9.0%, from 10,664 cases to 9,702 cases.[6]

New cases (never treated before) increased in proportion from 38.2% in 2014 to 39.1% in 2020. The proportion of previously treated cases decreased slightly from 57.1% in 2014 to 56.1% in 2020.

9,702
total number of cases treated for
problem drug use

39%
new cases
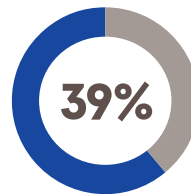
56%
previously treated cases

Type of service provider

Outpatient facilities accounted for the majority of cases treated over the period (63.6%). In 2020, 70.2% of cases were treated in outpatient facilities, an increase from 63.2% in 2014 **(Table 2)**.[7]

The proportion of treated cases reported by residential (inpatient) settings increased from 13.6% in 2014 to 20.4% in 2016, then decreased to 12.3% in 2020. Betwee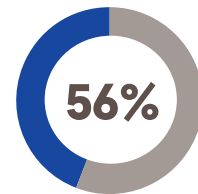n 2019 and 2020, the number of cases treated in residential settings decreased by 24.3%, from 1,571 cases to 1,190 cases. The reduction in residential case numbers can in part be attributed to temporary closures and measures introduced to comply with COVID-19 restrictions.

The proportion of cases treated in low threshold settings decreased from 12.0% in 2014 to 9.0% in 2020.

The proportion of cases treated in prison decreased from 8.5% in 2014 to 7.8% in 2020.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the collection of data from general practitioners was limited for much of 2020. The proportion of cases treated by general practitioners decreased from 2.6% in 2014 to 0.8% in 2020.
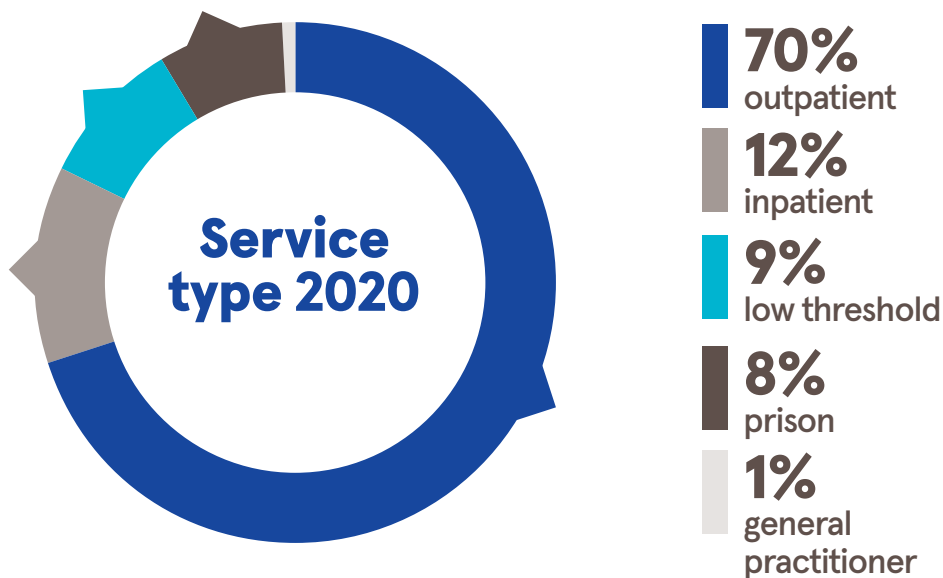

Service type 2020

70% outpatient

12% inpatient

9% low threshold

8% prison

1% general practitioner

Table 1: Number of cases treated for drugs as a main problem, by treatment status, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	9890		9892		9227		8922		10274		10664		9702	
New cases	3776	(38.2)	3742	(37.8)	3526	(38.2)	3257	(36.5)	3962	(38.6)	3979	(37.3)	3796	(39.1)
Previously treated cases	5643	(57.1)	5855	(59.2)	5335	(57.8)	5242	(58.8)	5872	(57.2)	5927	(55.6)	5441	(56.1)
Treatment status unknown	471	(4.8)	295	(3.0)	366	(4.0)	423	(4.7)	440	(4.3)	758	(7.1)	465	(4.8)

Table 2: Number of cases treated for drugs as a main problem, by type of service provider, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	9890		9892		9227		8922		10274		10664		9702	
Outpatient	6251	(63.2)	5818	(58.8)	5481	(59.4)	5610	(62.9)	6715	(65.4)	6946	(65.1)	6806	(70.2)
Inpatient*	1348	(13.6)	1779	(18.0)	1885	(20.4)	1757	(19.7)	1384	(13.5)	1571	(14.7)	1190	(12.3)
Low threshold	1190	(12.0)	1197	(12.1)	886	(9.6)	792	(8.9)	887	(8.6)	948	(8.9)	870	(9.0)
Prison	844	(8.5)	827	(8.4)	737	(8.0)	651	(7.3)	1082	(10.5)	848	(8.0)	754	(7.8)
General practitioner	257	(2.6)	271	(2.7)	238	(2.6)	112	(1.3)	206	(2.0)	351	(3.3)	82	(0.8)

* Includes any service where the client stays overnight, e.g., in-patient detoxification, therapeutic communities, respite and step down

Main problem drug

All cases

Opioids (mainly heroin) remain the main problem drug reported over the period. As a proportion of all cases treated, opioids decreased year-on-year from 50.0% in 2014 to 36.7% in 2020 **(Table 3)**.

Cocaine was the second most common main problem drug reported in 2020. The proportion of cases treated for cocaine as a main problem increased from 8.6% in 2014 to 27.0% in 2020.

Cannabis was the third most common main problem drug reported in 2020. The proportion of cases treated for cannabis as a main problem decreased from 27.6% in 2014 to 21.9% in 2020.

Benzodiazepines were the main problem for 11.3% of cases in 2020, an increase from 9.6% in 2014.

The proportion of cases with **Z-drugs** as a main problem decreased from 1.6% in 2014 to 0.7% in 2020.

MDMA (ecstasy), amphetamines, and volatile inhalants each continued to account for a small proportion of all treated cases in 2020.

In 2020, 22 (0.2%) cases reported pregabalin (Lyrica) as a main problem, a decrease from 39 cases in 2019. A further 80 cases reported pregabalin as a secondary problem in 2020, a decrease from 88 in 2019.

37% opioids
27% cocaine
22% cannabis
11% benzodiazepines
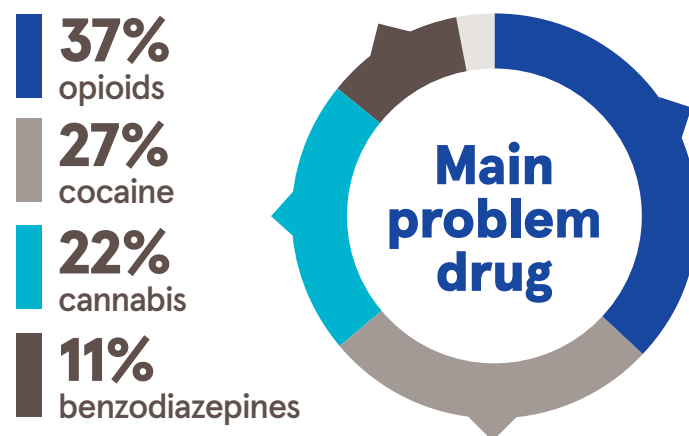
Main problem drug

New cases

In 2020, cocaine (35.8%) was the most common main problem drug reported by new cases, replacing cannabis which was the most common main drug among new cases from 2014 to 2019 **(Table 3)**. Cocaine was followed by cannabis (35.2%) and opioids (14.5%) in order of frequency among new cases.

Among new cases, cocaine increased from 11.3% in 2014 to 35.8% in 2020.

The proportion of new cases reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased steadily from 44.9% in 2014 to 35.2% in 2020.

The proportion of new cases reporting opioids as a main problem drug decreased from 27.4% in 2014 to 14.5% in 2020.

Previously treated cases

In 2020, opioids (52.5%) were the most common main problem drug reported by previously treated cases, followed by cocaine (20.7%), cannabis (12.7%), and benzodiazepines (11.6%).

Among previously treated cases, the proportion reporting opioids decreased from 64.8% in 2014 to 52.5% in 2020.

The proportion of previously treated cases reporting cocaine as a main problem increased from 6.8% in 2014 to 20.7% in 2020.

The proportion of previously treated cases reporting cannabis as a main problem decreased from 16.5% in 2014 to 12.7% in 2020.

Among previously treated cases, the proportion reporting benzodiazepines increased from 8.6% in 2014 to 11.6% in 2020.

Table 3: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in the 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	**9890**		**9892**		**9227**		**8922**		**10274**		**10664**		**9702**	
Opioids	4948	(50.0)	4732	(47.8)	4341	(47.0)	4016	(45.0)	4349	(42.3)	4133	(38.8)	3559	(36.7)
Cocaine	853	(8.6)	1026	(10.4)	1138	(12.3)	1500	(16.8)	2254	(21.9)	2560	(24.0)	2619	(27.0)
Cannabis	2730	(27.6)	2786	(28.2)	2439	(26.4)	2200	(24.7)	2358	(23.0)	2502	(23.5)	2120	(21.9)
Benzodiazepines	953	(9.6)	873	(8.8)	897	(9.7)	868	(9.7)	999	(9.7)	1082	(10.1)	1097	(11.3)
Z-Drugs*	155	(1.6)	154	(1.6)	103	(1.1)	82	(0.9)	48	(0.5)	72	(0.7)	72	(0.7)
Amphetamines	58	(0.6)	63	(0.6)	55	(0.6)	40	(0.4)	57	(0.6)	59	(0.6)	53	(0.5)
Novel psychoactive substances	71	(0.7)	85	(0.9)	72	(0.8)	51	(0.6)	48	(0.5)	63	(0.6)	43	(0.4)
MDMA (ecstasy)	56	(0.6)	51	(0.5)	53	(0.6)	44	(0.5)	34	(0.3)	47	(0.4)	31	(0.3)
Volatile inhalants	15	(0.2)	15	(0.2)	11	(0.1)	6	(0.1)	10	(0.1)	6	(0.1)	6	(0.1)
Other	51	(0.5)	107	(1.1)	118	(1.3)	115	(1.3)	117	(1.1)	140	(1.3)	102	(1.1)
New cases	**3776**		**3742**		**3526**		**3257**		**3962**		**3979**		**3796**	
Opioids	1036	(27.4)	971	(25.9)	950	(26.9)	809	(24.8)	719	(18.1)	676	(17.0)	550	(14.5)
Cocaine	425	(11.3)	513	(13.7)	568	(16.1)	748	(23.0)	1232	(31.1)	1258	(31.6)	1359	(35.8)
Cannabis	1696	(44.9)	1693	(45.2)	1452	(41.2)	1272	(39.1)	1505	(38.0)	1506	(37.8)	1338	(35.2)
Benzodiazepines	419	(11.1)	340	(9.1)	353	(10.0)	290	(8.9)	345	(8.7)	340	(8.5)	392	(10.3)
Z-Drugs*	58	(1.5)	46	(1.2)	41	(1.2)	22	(0.7)	17	(0.4)	24	(0.6)	27	(0.7)
Amphetamines	30	(0.8)	33	(0.9)	24	(0.7)	19	(0.6)	34	(0.9)	37	(0.9)	28	(0.7)
Novel psychoactive substances	43	(1.1)	53	(1.4)	36	(1.0)	21	(0.6)	25	(0.6)	22	(0.6)	26	(0.7)
MDMA (ecstasy)	37	(1.0)	31	(0.8)	39	(1.1)	29	(0.9)	18	(0.5)	38	(1.0)	21	(0.6)
Volatile inhalants	6	(0.2)	6	(0.2)	8	(0.2)	~	~	8	(0.2)	~	~	~	~
Other	26	(0.7)	56	(1.5)	55	(1.6)	42	(1.3)	59	(1.5)	73	(1.8)	52	(1.4)
Previously treated cases	**5643**		**5855**		**5335**		**5242**		**5872**		**5927**		**5441**	
Opioids	3658	(64.8)	3619	(61.8)	3204	(60.1)	3037	(57.9)	3478	(59.2)	3244	(54.7)	2856	(52.5)
Cocaine	381	(6.8)	487	(8.3)	541	(10.1)	692	(13.2)	944	(16.1)	1074	(18.1)	1126	(20.7)
Cannabis	932	(16.5)	1023	(17.5)	908	(17.0)	807	(15.4)	717	(12.2)	784	(13.2)	691	(12.7)
Benzodiazepines	487	(8.6)	504	(8.6)	500	(9.4)	534	(10.2)	596	(10.1)	661	(11.2)	631	(11.6)
Z-Drugs*	86	(1.5)	99	(1.7)	58	(1.1)	56	(1.1)	31	(0.5)	43	(0.7)	42	(0.8)
Amphetamines	27	(0.5)	28	(0.5)	29	(0.5)	19	(0.4)	19	(0.3)	20	(0.3)	22	(0.4)
Novel psychoactive substances	26	(0.5)	29	(0.5)	34	(0.6)	27	(0.5)	19	(0.3)	29	(0.5)	17	(0.3)
MDMA (ecstasy)	18	(0.3)	19	(0.3)	13	(0.2)	15	(0.3)	14	(0.2)	9	(0.2)	8	(0.1)
Volatile inhalants	9	(0.2)	9	(0.2)	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~
Other	19	(0.3)	38	(0.6)	45	(0.8)	54	(1.1)	52	(0.9)	62	(1.0)	45	(0.8)
Treatment status unknown	**471**		**295**		**366**		**423**		**440**		**758**		**465**	

* Z-Drugs are non-benzodiazepine hypnotic sedative drugs, e.g., zolpidem, zopiclone

~ Cells with five cases or fewer

Polydrug use

Over the period 2014 to 2020, the majority of cases (58.0%) reported polydrug use (problem use of more than one substance).

The proportion of cases that reported polydrug use decreased from 59.6% in 2014 to 53.4% in 2018, then increased to 58.6% in 2020 **(Table 4)**.

In 2020, cannabis (39.5%) was the most common additional substance reported by cases with polydrug use, followed by cocaine (36.8%), benzodiazepines (36.5%), and alcohol (34.9%) **(Table 5)**.

In 2020, and for the first time in the reporting period, cannabis ranked above alcohol as an additional substance among cases with polydrug use. The proportion of cases reporting cannabis as an additional substance increased from 34.1% in 2014 to 39.5% in 2020.

Similarly in 2020, and for the first time in the reporting period, cocaine was more common than alcohol as an additional substance. Cocaine was also reported more frequently than benzodiazepines in 2020, in contrast to the trend in the preceding years. The proportion of cases reporting cocaine as an additional substance increased from 21.9% in 2014 to 36.8% in 2020.

Opioids were reported as an additional substance by 18.7% of cases with polydrug use in 2020, similar to the rate of 18.3% reported in 2014.

Among *new cases* with polydrug use, alcohol (48.1%) was the most common additional substance in 2020, followed by cannabis (38.2%), cocaine (31.4%), and benzodiazepines (27.6%) **(Table 5)**.

The proportion of new cases reporting cocaine as an additional problem increased from 22.6% in 2014 to 31.4% in 2020.

Table 4: Polydrug use in cases treated for drugs as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	9890		9892		9227		8922		10274		10664		9702	
One drug only	3993	(40.4)	3872	(39.1)	3524	(38.2)	3816	(42.8)	4787	(46.6)	4803	(45.0)	4019	(41.4)
Two or more drugs	5897	(59.6)	6020	(60.9)	5703	(61.8)	5106	(57.2)	5487	(53.4)	5861	(55.0)	5683	(58.6)

Table 5: Polydrug use – additional problem drugs for all cases and new cases, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All polydrug cases	5897		6020		5703		5106		5487		5861		5683	
Cannabis	2012	(34.1)	1953	(32.4)	1878	(32.9)	1690	(33.1)	1937	(35.3)	2166	(37.0)	2246	(39.5)
Cocaine	1289	(21.9)	1360	(22.6)	1475	(25.9)	1435	(28.1)	1619	(29.5)	1928	(32.9)	2092	(36.8)
Benzodiazepines	2294	(38.9)	2316	(38.5)	2105	(36.9)	1846	(36.2)	1987	(36.2)	2088	(35.6)	2076	(36.5)
Alcohol	2078	(35.2)	2051	(34.1)	1943	(34.1)	1914	(37.5)	2053	(37.4)	2189	(37.3)	1986	(34.9)
Opioids	1082	(18.3)	1060	(17.6)	1222	(21.4)	1078	(21.1)	969	(17.7)	1180	(20.1)	1062	(18.7)
MDMA (ecstasy)	431	(7.3)	519	(8.6)	465	(8.2)	384	(7.5)	432	(7.9)	493	(8.4)	424	(7.5)
Z-Drugs*	355	(6.0)	436	(7.2)	438	(7.7)	334	(6.5)	278	(5.1)	208	(3.5)	247	(4.3)
Amphetamines	162	(2.7)	138	(2.3)	128	(2.2)	129	(2.5)	128	(2.3)	145	(2.5)	145	(2.6)
Novel psychoactive substances	98	(1.7)	108	(1.8)	115	(2.0)	52	(1.0)	52	(0.9)	76	(1.3)	78	(1.4)
Volatile inhalants	21	(0.4)	14	(0.2)	13	(0.2)	18	(0.4)	20	(0.4)	21	(0.4)	12	(0.2)
Other	156	(2.6)	222	(3.7)	224	(3.9)	261	(5.1)	268	(4.9)	338	(5.8)	316	(5.6)
New cases	2115		2077		2016		1693		1896		1974		2013	
Cannabis	661	(31.3)	632	(30.4)	603	(29.9)	561	(33.1)	662	(34.9)	750	(38.0)	769	(38.2)
Cocaine	478	(22.6)	465	(22.4)	585	(29.0)	465	(27.5)	517	(27.3)	607	(30.7)	633	(31.4)
Benzodiazepines	646	(30.5)	644	(31.0)	636	(31.5)	464	(27.4)	480	(25.3)	535	(27.1)	555	(27.6)
Alcohol	925	(43.7)	910	(43.8)	861	(42.7)	805	(47.5)	929	(49.0)	1013	(51.3)	969	(48.1)
Opioids	220	(10.4)	213	(10.3)	297	(14.7)	214	(12.6)	179	(9.4)	157	(8.0)	143	(7.1)
MDMA (ecstasy)	237	(11.2)	253	(12.2)	237	(11.8)	195	(11.5)	219	(11.6)	248	(12.6)	238	(11.8)
Z-Drugs*	78	(3.7)	102	(4.9)	111	(5.5)	79	(4.7)	51	(2.7)	26	(1.3)	34	(1.7)
Amphetamines	70	(3.3)	58	(2.8)	53	(2.6)	58	(3.4)	50	(2.6)	62	(3.1)	75	(3.7)
Novel psychoactive substances	36	(1.7)	42	(2.0)	50	(2.5)	18	(1.1)	16	(0.8)	26	(1.3)	23	(1.1)
Volatile inhalants	8	(0.4)	10	(0.5)	~	~	6	(0.4)	6	(0.3)	7	(0.4)	~	~
Other	61	(2.9)	83	(4.0)	85	(4.2)	103	(6.1)	128	(6.8)	138	(7.0)	142	(7.1)

*   Z-Drugs are non-benzodiazepine hypnotic sedative drugs, e.g., zolpidem, zopiclone

~   Cells with five cases or fewer

Risk factors

Risk factors of interest to the NDTRS include injecting behaviour, sharing of needles and syringes, and sharing of other drug paraphernalia (such as joints, straws, foil, pipes, spoons, filters, citric, water to mix drugs, and water or bleach to clean equipment).

Injecting behaviour

The proportion of all cases that had ever injected decreased from 35.7% in 2014 to 23.3% in 2020 **(Table 6)**.

Among new cases, the proportion that reported ever injecting decreased over the period from 17.0% in 2014 to 5.1% in 2020.

The proportion of previously treated cases that reported ever injecting decreased from 48.4% in 2014 to 36.6% in 2020.

Among cases that had ever injected, the proportion currently injecting (i.e., in the 30 days prior to treatment) decreased from 37.0% in 2014 to 31.1% in 2020.

Sharing of drug paraphernalia

Prior to 2016, information on sharing of any drug paraphernalia, including needles and syringes was collected in a single question. To comply with reporting requirements of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), this question was changed in 2016 so that sharing of 'needles and syringes' is now recorded separately from sharing of 'other drug paraphernalia'.

The transition to the new question resulted in an initial poor response whereby the data for 2016 to 2018 are not reported **(Table 6)**. However, improved responses mean that from 2019, data can be reported. Data validation will continue to improve the quality of the responses however these data should still be interpreted with caution given the high number of unknown values.

In 2020, 37.8% of cases that had ever injected had ever shared needles and syringes.

Table 6: Injecting history in cases treated for drugs as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

2020	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	9890		9892		9227		8922		10274		10664		9702	
Ever injected	3528	(35.7)	3330	(33.7)	2960	(32.1)	2651	(29.7)	2740	(26.7)	2540	(23.8)	2260	(23.3)
Ever shared **any** equipment including needles and syringes*	1744	(49.4)	1519	(45.6)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Ever shared needles and syringes only*	*	*	*	*	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	946	(37.2)	855	(37.8)
New cases	3776		3742		3526		3257		3962		3979		3796	
Ever injected	642	(17.0)	541	(14.5)	476	(13.5)	359	(11.0)	314	(7.9)	255	(6.4)	194	(5.1)
Ever shared **any** equipment including needles and syringes*	255	(39.7)	192	(35.5)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Ever shared needles and syringes only*	*	*	*	*	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	74	(29.0)	50	(25.8)
Previously treated cases	5643		5855		5335		5242		5872		5972		5441	
Ever injected	2730	(48.4)	2701	(46.1)	2379	(44.6)	2165	(41.3)	2367	(40.3)	2213	(37.3)	1991	(36.6)
Ever shared **any** equipment including needles and syringes*	1431	(52.4)	1309	(48.5)	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Ever shared needles and syringes only*	*	*	*	*	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	N/A‡	858	(38.8)	784	(39.4)
Current risk														
All cases	3528		3330		2960		2651		2740		2540		2260	
Currently injecting†	1304	(37.0)	1223	(36.7)	984	(33.2)	862	(32.5)	815	(29.7)	759	(29.9)	702	(31.1)
New cases	642		541		476		359		314		255		194	
Currently injecting†	298	(46.4)	228	(42.1)	186	(39.1)	136	(37.9)	131	(41.7)	94	(36.9)	82	(42.3)
Previously treated cases	2730		2701		2379		2165		2367		2213		1991	
Currently injecting†	920	(33.7)	937	(34.7)	760	(31.9)	691	(31.9)	660	(27.9)	637	(28.8)	582	(29.2)

* Ever shared any equipment including needles and syringes was collected up to 2015. From 2016 the question changed to comply with European reporting requirements

† In the 30 days prior to treatment

‡ N/A Not available, see description above

Socio-demographic characteristics

- The median age of cases increased over time from 29 years in 2014 to 31 years in 2018 and has remained stable at 31 years since **(Table 7)**. For new cases, the median age increased from 25 years in 2014 to 27 years in 2020.

- In 2020, 6.9% of all cases were aged 17 years or younger. Among new cases in 2020, the proportion aged 17 years or younger was 14.4%.

- Over the period, almost three-quarters (73.1%) of cases reported were male. In 2020, 73.9% of cases were male, while females accounted for 25.9% of cases (gender was unknown for 0.2% of cases).

- The proportion of cases recorded as homeless increased from 8.5% in 2014 to 10.5% in 2020.

- The proportion of cases with an Irish Traveller ethnicity was 3.2% in 2014 and 3.0% in 2020.[8]

- The proportion of cases recorded as having ceased education (for the first time) before the age of 16 years decreased from 35.2% in 2014 to 32.5% in 2020.

- The proportion of all cases that were in paid employment increased from 8.3% in 2014 to 16.2% in 2020.

- Over the reporting period, 62.0% of all cases were unemployed. The proportion of cases that were unemployed decreased from 64.4% in 2014 to 54.9% in 2019, then increased to 59.0% in 2020.

- In each year, rates of homelessness, ceasing education before age 16, and unemployment were higher among previously treated cases than among new cases.

- In 2020, 13.8% (1,343) of cases treated for drugs were *residing with children* aged 17 years or younger.[9] Males accounted for 54.7% (735), and females 45.2% (607) of these cases (gender was not known for one case).

- A quarter of cases (24.4% or 2,363 cases) treated for drugs in 2020 had children aged 17 years or younger who were *not residing with them*.[10] Three quarters of these cases (74.6%) were males, and a quarter were females (25.4%).

Gender

26% females
74% males
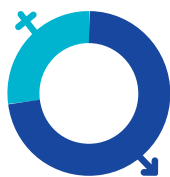
31 yrs median age

11% homeless

16% employed

Table 7: Socio-demographic characteristics of cases treated for drugs as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cases	**9890**		**9892**		**9227**		**8922**		**10274**		**10664**		**9702**	
Median age (range [1])	29	17–45	30	17–46	30	17–47	30	17–47	31	17–48	31	17–48	31	17–48
Under 18	747	(7.6)	685	(6.9)	629	(6.8)	591	(6.6)	732	(7.1)	822	(7.7)	674	(6.9)
Male	7202	(72.8)	7146	(72.2)	6676	(72.4)	6449	(72.3)	7626	(74.2)	7859	(73.7)	7167	(73.9)
Homeless	840	(8.5)	910	(9.2)	886	(9.6)	858	(9.6)	980	(9.5)	1173	(11.0)	1023	(10.5)
Traveller	313	(3.2)	282	(2.9)	296	(3.2)	310	(3.5)	343	(3.3)	320	(3.0)	291	(3.0)
Education ceased before 16 years	3486	(35.2)	3511	(35.5)	3236	(35.1)	3118	(34.9)	3551	(34.6)	3306	(31.0)	3154	(32.5)
In paid employment	816	(8.3)	880	(8.9)	1028	(11.1)	1280	(14.3)	1735	(16.9)	1700	(15.9)	1574	(16.2)
Unemployed	6368	(64.4)	6368	(64.4)	6107	(66.2)	5702	(63.9)	6356	(61.9)	5852	(54.9)	5726	(59.0)
Retired/unable to work including disability	1135	(11.5)	1136	(11.5)	805	(8.7)	712	(8.0)	823	(8.0)	1251	(11.7)	1165	(12.0)
New cases	**3776**		**3742**		**3526**		**3257**		**3962**		**3979**		**3796**	
Median age (range [1])	25	15–44	25	16–45	25	16–46	26	16–46	26	16–45	26	15–45	27	15–46
Under 18	566	(15.0)	498	(13.3)	469	(13.3)	413	(12.7)	537	(13.6)	618	(15.5)	548	(14.4)
Male	2842	(75.3)	2814	(75.2)	2628	(74.5)	2446	(75.1)	3000	(75.7)	3065	(77.0)	2886	(76.0)
Homeless	248	(6.6)	212	(5.7)	223	(6.3)	199	(6.1)	248	(6.3)	263	(6.6)	229	(6.0)
Traveller	135	(3.6)	107	(2.9)	102	(2.9)	97	(3.0)	109	(2.8)	112	(2.8)	100	(2.6)
Education ceased before 16 years	1046	(27.7)	1011	(27.0)	969	(27.5)	834	(25.6)	946	(23.9)	888	(22.3)	841	(22.2)
In paid employment	424	(11.2)	507	(13.5)	537	(15.2)	652	(20.0)	943	(23.8)	901	(22.6)	903	(23.8)
Unemployed	2091	(55.4)	2099	(56.1)	1990	(56.4)	1757	(53.9)	2029	(51.2)	1765	(44.4)	1772	(46.7)
Retired/unable to work including disability	364	(9.6)	322	(8.6)	242	(6.9)	183	(5.6)	222	(5.6)	364	(9.1)	308	(8.1)
Previously treated cases	**5643**		**5855**		**5335**		**5242**		**5872**		**5927**		**5441**	
Median age (range [1])	31	19–45	32	19–46	32	19–47	33	19–47	34	19–49	34	19–50	33	20–49
Under 18	168	(3.0)	171	(2.9)	141	(2.6)	154	(2.9)	170	(2.9)	155	(2.6)	111	(2.0)
Male	4041	(71.6)	4117	(70.3)	3782	(70.9)	3686	(70.3)	4328	(73.7)	4211	(71.0)	3948	(72.6)
Homeless	526	(9.3)	660	(11.3)	617	(11.6)	620	(11.8)	679	(11.6)	810	(13.7)	735	(13.5)
Traveller	159	(2.8)	172	(2.9)	183	(3.4)	194	(3.7)	211	(3.6)	180	(3.0)	174	(3.2)
Education ceased before 16 years	2328	(41.3)	2440	(41.7)	2162	(40.5)	2183	(41.6)	2460	(41.9)	2224	(37.5)	2165	(39.8)
In paid employment	375	(6.6)	354	(6.0)	464	(8.7)	562	(10.7)	738	(12.6)	678	(11.4)	605	(11.1)
Unemployed	3955	(70.1)	4080	(69.7)	3872	(72.6)	3717	(70.9)	4056	(69.1)	3714	(62.7)	3722	(68.4)
Retired/unable to work including disability	714	(12.7)	790	(13.5)	533	(10.0)	495	(9.4)	563	(9.6)	782	(13.2)	745	(13.7)
Treatment status unknown	**471**		**295**		**366**		**423**		**440**		**758**		**465**	

Cocaine

This section focuses on the socio-demographic characteristics of cases with cocaine as a main problem drug **(Table 8)**. In 2020, 2,619 cases were recorded with cocaine as a main problem, an increase from 853 cases in 2014.

The median age when entering treatment was 30 years in both 2014 and 2020 and was relatively stable in the period between.

The proportion of cases aged 17 years or younger was 2.0% in 2014 and 1.7% in 2020.

In each year, males accounted for the majority of cases (4 of every 5) with cocaine as a main problem. The proportion of female cases increased from 17.2% in 2014 to 20.8% in 2020.

The proportion of cases in paid employment increased from 19.9% in 2014 to 35.0% in 2018, then decreased to 30.2% in 2020.

The proportion of cases with polydrug use decreased from 70.2% in 2014 to 63.3% in 2020. In 2020, the most common additional drugs were alcohol (53.9%), cannabis (49.8%), and benzodiazepines (31.7%).

In 2020, crack cocaine accounted for 15.8% of all cases treated for cocaine as a main problem (compared to 14.3% in 2019).

A breakdown of cocaine cases by county of residence is presented in Appendix A.

2,619 cocaine cases

79% males

30 yrs median age

30% employed

Table 8: Socio-demographic characteristics of cases treated for cocaine as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
All cocaine	**853**		**1026**		**1138**		**1500**		**2254**		**2560**		**2619**	
Median age (range[1])	30	19-44	30	19-44	29	18-44	30	19-45	30	19-44	30	19-46	30	19-45
Under 18	17	(2.0)	20	(1.9)	27	(2.4)	26	(1.7)	39	(1.7)	40	(1.6)	45	(1.7)
Female	147	(17.2)	197	(19.2)	259	(22.8)	284	(18.9)	453	(20.1)	516	(20.2)	546	(20.8)
Homeless	26	(3.0)	40	(3.9)	38	(3.3)	56	(3.7)	107	(4.7)	151	(5.9)	150	(5.7)
Traveller	16	(1.9)	21	(2.0)	30	(2.6)	42	(2.8)	41	(1.8)	63	(2.5)	57	(2.2)
Education ceased before 16 years	278	(32.6)	306	(29.8)	309	(27.2)	390	(26.0)	598	(26.5)	636	(24.8)	644	(24.6)
In paid employment	167	(19.9)	249	(24.3)	322	(28.3)	502	(33.5)	790	(35.0)	783	(30.6)	791	(30.2)
Unemployed	465	(54.5)	536	(52.2)	611	(53.7)	773	(51.5)	1144	(50.8)	1267	(49.5)	1321	(50.4)
Retired/unable to work including disability	133	(15.6)	144	(14.0)	104	(9.1)	90	(6.0)	136	(6.0)	240	(9.4)	253	(9.7)
New cases	**425**		**513**		**568**		**748**		**1232**		**1258**		**1359**	
Median age (range[1])	28	18-44	28	18-43	27	18-43	28	18-44	29	19-43	28	19-44	29	19-44
Under 18	16	(3.8)	16	(3.1)	20	(3.5)	15	(2.0)	28	(2.3%)	30	(2.4)	34	(2.5)
Female	59	(13.9)	91	(17.7)	107	(18.8)	123	(16.4)	216	(17.5)	207	(16.5)	251	(18.5)
Homeless	11	(2.6)	11	(2.1)	17	(3.0)	27	(3.6)	50	(4.1)	67	(5.3)	53	(3.9)
Traveller	12	(2.8)	12	(2.3)	15	(2.6)	19	(2.5)	19	(1.5)	37	(2.9)	30	(2.2)
Education ceased before 16 years	135	(31.8)	135	(26.3)	124	(21.8)	161	(21.5)	284	(23.1)	269	(21.4)	271	(19.9)
In paid employment	103	(24.2)	155	(30.2)	190	(33.5)	286	(38.2)	497	(40.3)	466	(37.0)	507	(37.3)
Unemployed	218	(51.3)	240	(46.8)	273	(48.1)	357	(47.7)	570	(46.3)	560	(44.5)	583	(42.9)
Retired/unable to work including disability	64	(15.1)	63	(12.3)	46	(8.1)	37	(4.9)	65	(5.3)	104	(8.3)	114	(8.4)
Previously treated cases	**381**		**487**		**541**		**692**		**944**		**1074**		**1126**	
Median age (range[1])	31	21-43	31	20-47	31	20-46	32	19-46	32	19-46	32	19-48	31	20-47
Under 18	~	~	~	~	7	(1.3)	9	(1.3)	10	(1.1)	9	(0.8)	7	(0.6)
Female	77	(20.2)	102	(20.9)	144	(26.6)	151	(21.8)	216	(22.9)	265	(24.7)	264	(23.4)
Homeless	14	(3.7)	27	(5.5)	20	(3.7)	28	(4.0)	46	(4.9)	70	(6.5)	89	(7.9)
Traveller	~	~	9	(1.8)	15	(2.8)	20	(2.9)	20	(2.1)	24	(2.2)	22	(2.0)
Education ceased before 16 years	133	(34.9)	168	(34.9)	180	(33.3)	219	(31.6)	298	(31.6)	320	(29.8)	339	(30.1)
In paid employment	57	(15.0)	88	(18.1)	129	(23.8)	193	(27.9)	272	(28.8)	250	(23.3)	249	(22.1)
Unemployed	223	(58.5)	283	(58.1)	317	(58.6)	394	(56.9)	538	(57.0)	600	(55.9)	687	(61.0)
Retired/unable to work including disability	61	(16.0)	78	(16.0)	56	(10.4)	46	(6.6)	62	(6.6)	123	(11.5)	114	(10.1)
Treatment status unknown	**47**		**26**		**29**		**60**		**78**		**228**		**134**	

~ Cells with five cases or fewer

Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) area of residence

In 2020, the highest number of reported cases resided[12] in CHO 9 **(Table 9)** (see below for reference to areas included in each CHO). As participation in the NDTRS is not uniform across the country, conclusions based on geographic analyses are limited.

Table 9: Number of cases treated for drugs as a main problem by Community Healthcare Organisation area of residence, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
All cases	**9890**	**9892**	**9227**	**8922**	**10274**	**10664**	**9702**
CHO 1	297	284	367	382	312	477	398
CHO 2	356	411	402	375	329	295	368
CHO 3	809	748	779	749	843	851	839
CHO 4	1390	1429	1206	1055	1169	1216	1007
CHO 5	1366	1394	1261	1170	1277	1260	1082
CHO 6	470	470	366	401	448	468	471
CHO 7	1738	1750	1640	1531	2043	2137	1848
CHO 8	1075	1020	921	926	1007	983	902
CHO 9	2068	2007	1845	1876	2474	2531	2390
Other/unknown	321	379	440	457	372	446	397

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
New cases	**3776**	**3742**	**3526**	**3257**	**3962**	**3979**	**3796**
CHO 1	149	147	159	182	147	230	171
CHO 2	126	162	185	173	132	104	111
CHO 3	381	322	361	310	417	420	419
CHO 4	589	575	513	467	530	515	465
CHO 5	611	613	537	498	554	599	470
CHO 6	200	199	149	179	213	168	209
CHO 7	572	593	543	509	664	631	616
CHO 8	479	471	434	367	460	472	439
CHO 9	587	581	530	460	765	765	781
Other/unknown	82	79	115	112	80	75	115
Previously treated	**5643**	**5855**	**5335**	**5242**	**5872**	**5927**	**5441**
CHO 1	135	121	180	172	150	216	204
CHO 2	227	247	212	198	163	155	180
CHO 3	362	357	381	409	396	382	372
CHO 4	773	841	667	567	627	681	534
CHO 5	746	776	711	640	671	606	604
CHO 6	247	259	200	206	227	258	239
CHO 7	1025	1095	997	933	1315	1335	1152
CHO 8	540	514	463	457	493	443	440
CHO 9	1376	1370	1224	1336	1568	1527	1459
Other/unknown	212	275	300	324	262	324	257
Treatment status unknown	**471**	**295**	**366**	**423**	**440**	**758**	**465**

LHO areas in each Community Healthcare Organisation area

CHO 1 – Donegal LHO, Sligo/Leitrim/West Clare LHO and Cavan/Monaghan LHO

CHO 2 – Galway LHO, Roscommon and Mayo LHO

CHO 3 – Clare LHO, Limerick LHO, North Tipperary/East Limerick LHO

CHO 4 – Kerry LHO, North Cork LHO, North Lee LHO, South Lee LHO and West Cork LHO

CHO 5 – South Tipperary LHO, Carlow/Kilkenny LHO, Waterford LHO and Wexford LHO

CHO 6 – Wicklow LHO, Dun Laoghaire LHO and Dublin South East LHO

CHO 7 – Kildare/West Wicklow LHO, Dublin West LHO, Dublin South City LHO and Dublin South West LHO

CHO 8 – Laois/Offaly LHO, Longford/Westmeath LHO, Louth LHO and Meath LHO

CHO 9 – Dublin North LHO, Dublin North Central LHO and Dublin North West LHO
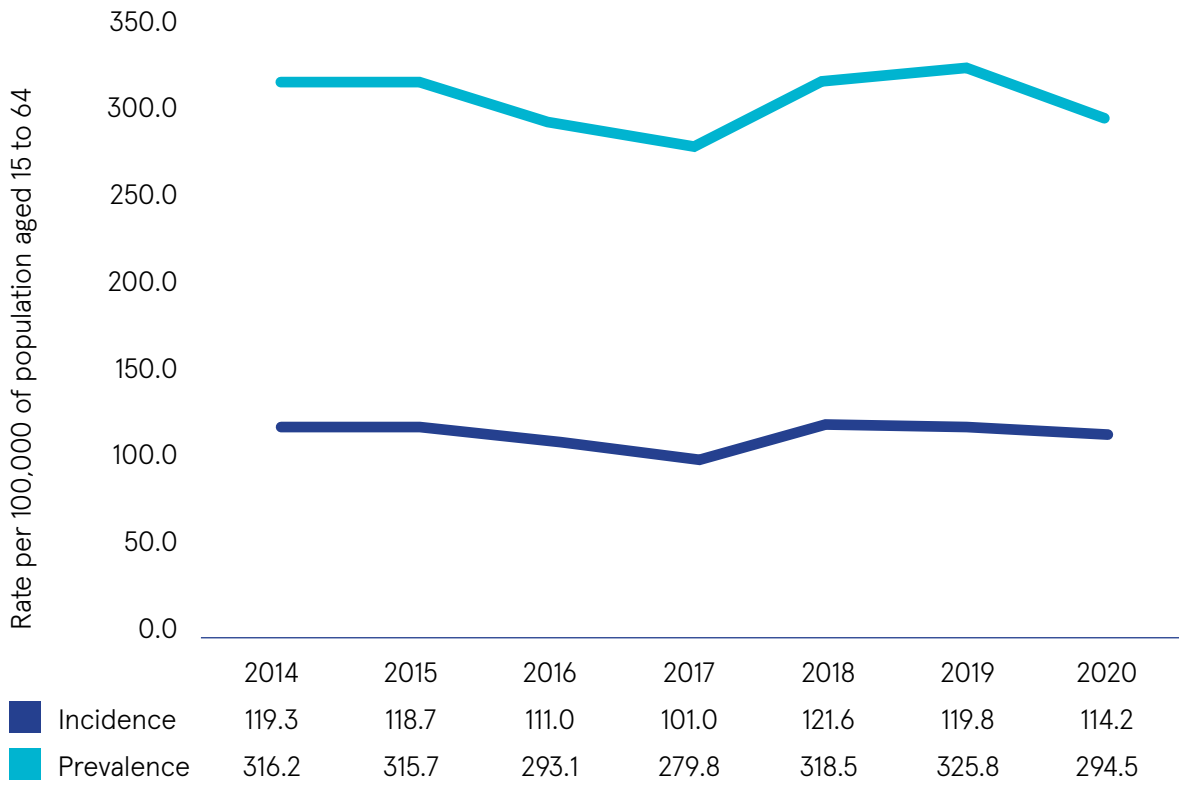
Incidence and prevalence of treatment

Annual rates for the incidence (new cases) and prevalence (all cases) of treated problem drug use were calculated per 100,000 of the population aged 15 to 64 years based on census figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO) [13] **(Figure 1)**.

Incidence was 119.3 per 100,000 in 2014 and 119.8 per 100,000 in 2019. In 2020, incidence was 114.2 per 100,000.

Prevalence, which includes new cases and those cases returning to treatment, increased from 316.2 per 100,000 in 2014 to 325.8 per 100,000 in 2019. In 2020, prevalence was 294.5 per 100,000.

Changes in incidence and prevalence should be interpreted with caution due to the proportion of cases where treatment status was unknown (4.8% in 2020) and the impact of COVID-19 on case numbers for 2020 **(Table 1)**.

Figure 1: Incidence and prevalence of treated problem drug use per 100,000 of the 15 to 64 year-old population, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Incidence	119.3	118.7	111.0	101.0	121.6	119.8	114.2
Prevalence	316.2	315.7	293.1	279.8	318.5	325.8	294.5

Acknowledgements

The NDTRS team would like to acknowledge the ongoing support of the staff in the alcohol and drug treatment services throughout the country, without whom it would not be possible to maintain the NDTRS. Their participation and cooperation are very much appreciated and valued, and especially so in a year that has been extremely challenging due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions.

Notes

1. This document may be cited as: Kelleher C, Carew AM, and Lyons S (2020) *Drug Treatment in Ireland 2014 to 2020*. HRB StatLink Series 6. Dublin: Health Research Board. Available at: www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34162 and at www.hrb.ie/publications.

2. More detailed information on the NDTRS methodology can be found in previously published HRB Trends Series papers at: www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/publications_files/HRB_Trend_Series_12_Trends_in_treated_problem_drug_use_in_Ireland_2005_to_2010_02.pdf

3. The capacity and functionality of treatment services were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The NDTRS surveyed participating services to estimate the impact of the restrictions on treatment data for 2020 (the response rate was 80%). Around 40% of services surveyed expressed some impact on their ability to provide returns, while around 50% expected some impact on numbers (unpublished data).

4. To comply with EMCDDA requirements, and to enable services to accurately reflect their activities in response to COVID-19 restrictions, the NDTRS added functionality to the LINK database to record treatment provided over the telephone or internet (teleworking).

5. NDTRS data are case-based which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the database; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

6. The NDTRS interactive tables will be updated to reflect the changes at: www.drugsandalcohol.ie/tables/

7. Coverage of services was 71.1% for 2020. The number of services participating in the NDTRS varies annually, making small fluctuations in the numbers of cases difficult to interpret.

8. Based on the 2016 Census, the proportion of Irish Travellers in the general population is 0.7% (Central Statistics Office, 2020) www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8e/

9. Service users *currently residing with children* refers to the 30 days prior to treatment. This includes children where the service user has a carer or guardianship role; non-related children such as foster children and stepchildren; and the children of a long-term cohabiting partner. Where the service user is a grandparent or other close relative and is the official guardian of a child with whom they are living, they are recorded as living with children.

10. Children who are *not residing with* the service user refers to children currently living with another parent; children in formal care or informal care; and children living elsewhere who are biological children/adopted children, or children who are under the official

guardianship of the service user. It also refers to children who have left home, and children who are living with other family members or friends temporarily, but who are not considered by the service user to be living in care.

11. Age range presented is 5th percentile to 95th percentile (90% of cases are included within this range).

12. Area of residence relates to the service user's place of residence in the 30 days prior to commencing treatment, for all service types excluding prison. Where a service user is treated in prison and has been in prison for less than six months prior to starting treatment, area of residence is the place of residence prior to imprisonment. Otherwise, the prison location is recorded.

13. Population data are taken from the Central Statistics Office at: www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2020/

Appendix A: Number of cases treated for cocaine as a main problem, by county of residence, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
All cases	**853**	**1026**	**1138**	**1500**	**2254**	**2560**	**2619**
Carlow	12	15	16	11	15	24	28
Cavan	~	0	~	11	~	21	14
Clare	8	10	27	30	42	57	51
Cork	82	72	80	124	185	220	234
Donegal	~	~	13	31	44	69	65
Dublin	486	558	573	772	1195	1317	1323
Galway	9	9	15	20	15	33	33
Kerry	10	23	21	26	49	65	50
Kildare	16	23	22	28	44	46	61
Kilkenny	~	12	16	11	31	31	21
Laois	7	11	19	13	32	31	36
Leitrim	~	0	0	~	~	~	~
Limerick	34	43	72	72	137	147	134
Longford	~	11	~	~	~	11	16
Louth	12	29	29	43	54	61	52
Mayo	~	8	6	12	16	13	38
Meath	16	10	20	39	48	33	45
Monaghan	~	0	0	~	0	~	8
Offaly	~	23	~	6	21	20	13
Roscommon	~	10	17	14	14	17	35
Sligo	11	10	6	14	14	17	20
Tipperary	22	25	45	55	69	85	85
Waterford	30	30	40	54	68	61	66
Wexford	35	31	35	39	50	60	56
Westmeath	8	13	12	8	15	24	14
Wicklow	24	34	24	49	81	87	102
Ireland unknown	~	6	15	7	~	~	~
Outside Ireland	~	~	~	7	~	~	11
Total	**853**	**1026**	**1138**	**1500**	**2254**	**2560**	**2619**

~ Cells with 5 cases or fewer

**Improving people's health through
research and information**