

**HRB Bulletin**  
National Drug Treatment  
Reporting System

**2014 – 2020**  
**Alcohol**  
**Treatment Data**

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**Published by:**

Health Research Board, Dublin  
An Bord Taighde Sláinte  
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HRB StatLink Series ISSN 2737-7652

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## **HRB StatLink Series 7**

# National Drug Treatment Reporting System 2014 – 2020 Alcohol Treatment Data

Derek O'Neill, Anne Marie Carew and Suzi Lyons

## Summary

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In this bulletin, trends in **treated problem alcohol use** are described for the seven-year period from 2014 to 2020. The data are taken 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 this seven-year period, 51,205 cases were treated for **alcohol** as a main problem.

- The number of cases treated decreased from 7,546 in 2019 to 5,824 in 2020, a drop of 22.8%.
- The proportion of *new cases* decreased from 48.6% in 2014 to 42.8% in 2020.

### Level of problem alcohol use

- In 2020, the **median age** at which cases first started drinking alcohol was 16 years.
- Over the period, almost two-in-every-three (66.1%) cases were classified as **alcohol dependent**.
- In 2020, 57.2% of new cases were classified as **alcohol dependent** as compared to 53.2% in 2014.
- The proportion of previously treated cases classified as **alcohol dependent** increased from 66.6% in 2014 to 72.1% in 2020.

## Socio-demographics

- In 2020, the **median age** of treated cases was 41 years, similar to previous years.
- The majority of cases in 2020 were **male** (61.9%).
- The proportion of cases with an **Irish Traveller** ethnicity was 2.7% in 2014 and 2.1% in 2020.
- Almost half (49.2%) of cases in 2020 were **unemployed**.
- The proportion of cases that were **homeless** increased from 6.4% in 2014 to 8.5% in 2020.
- In 2020, 10.7% of males and 4.8% of females were recorded as **homeless**.
- Among female cases recorded in 2020, 26.3% (583) were **residing with children** aged 17 years or younger, as compared to 12.0% (432) of all male cases.
- In 2020, almost one-third (32.6%) of females were aged **50 years and over** compared to one-quarter (25.7%) of males.

## Polydrug use

Polydrug use was reported by almost one-quarter (23.1%) of those treated for problem alcohol use.

- **Cannabis** was the most common additional drug used. The proportion of cases reporting cannabis use declined from 63.2% in 2014 to 54.9% in 2020.
- **Cocaine** was the second most common additional drug recorded. This has increased from 28.2% in 2014 to 54.1% in 2020.
- In 2020, **cocaine** as an additional drug was more common among males (55.6%) than among females (50.3%)
- **Benzodiazepines** were the third most common additional drug reported (24.6%) in 2020.
- **Opioids** were the fourth most common additional drug reported (11.6%) in 2020.
- In 2020, **opioids** as an additional problem drug were more common among females (14.6%) than among males (10.4%).

## NDTRS cases 2014 to 2020

This bulletin presents alcohol treatment data from the NDTRS for the period 2014–2020.<sup>1</sup> Data in this bulletin supersede all previously published data from NDTRS publications.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3,4</sup>

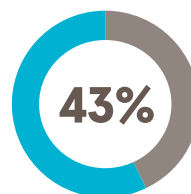
In the seven-year period, a total of 51,205 cases treated for problem alcohol use reported alcohol as the main problem substance.<sup>5</sup>

The number of treated cases recorded decreased from 7,760 in 2014 to 5,824 in 2020 (**Table 1**).<sup>6,7,8</sup> Between 2019 and 2020, the number of treated cases decreased by 22.8%, from 7,546 cases to 5,824 cases.

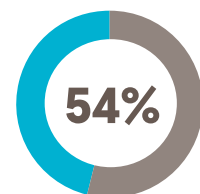
New cases (never treated before) decreased in proportion from 48.6% in 2014 to 42.8% in 2020. The proportion of previously treated cases decreased from 49.1% in 2014 to 45.1% in 2019, then increased to 54.4% in 2020.

**5,824**

total number of cases treated for  
problem alcohol use



new  
cases



previously  
treated  
cases

## Type of service provider

In 2020, three-in-every-five (60.2%) cases were treated in outpatient facilities (**Table 2**). The proportion of cases treated in residential settings decreased from 36.1% in 2014 to 28.8% in 2020. The reduction in residential 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 services was 8.0%, while the proportion of cases treated in prison was 3.0% in 2020. General practitioners do not currently report alcohol treatment figures to the NDTRS.

## Polydrug use

In 2020, 23.1% of cases treated for problem alcohol use reported problem use of more than one substance (polydrug use) (**Table 3**).

In 2020, cannabis (54.9%) was the most common additional drug reported by cases with polydrug use, followed by cocaine (54.1%) and benzodiazepines (24.6%) (**Table 4**).

The proportion of cases reporting cannabis decreased from 63.2% in 2014 to 54.9% in 2020.

Problem use of cocaine increased from 28.2% in 2014 to 54.1% in 2020.

The proportion of cases treated for benzodiazepines decreased from 27.9% in 2014 to 21.8% in 2019, then increased to 24.6% in 2020.

In 2020, 7 (0.5%) cases reported pregabalin (Lyrica) as a problem in addition to alcohol, a decrease from 15 (1.0%) cases in 2019.

### Most common additional drugs

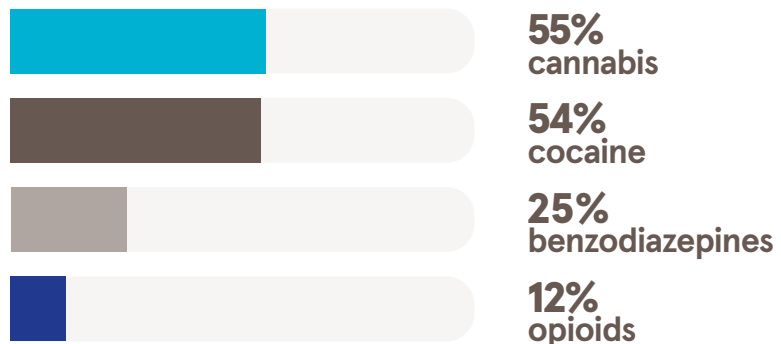


Table 1: Number of cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, by treatment status, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
New cases	3772	(48.6)	3553	(46.6)	3678	(48.1)	3500	(47.6)	3230	(43.3)	3296	(43.7)	2490	(42.8)
Previously treated cases	3807	(49.1)	3948	(51.8)	3783	(49.5)	3652	(49.7)	3705	(49.6)	3400	(45.1)	3170	(54.4)
Treatment status unknown	181	(2.3)	117	(1.5)	182	(2.4)	198	(2.7)	529	(7.1)	850	(11.3)	164	(2.8)

Table 2: Number of cases treated for alcohol 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	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
Outpatient	4133	(53.3)	4018	(52.7)	4005	(52.4)	3894	(53.0)	4087	(54.8)	4093	(54.2)	3505	(60.2)
Inpatient*	2803	(36.1)	2916	(38.3)	2994	(39.2)	2949	(40.1)	2792	(37.4)	2806	(37.2)	1680	(28.8)
Low threshold	605	(7.8)	480	(6.3)	495	(6.5)	436	(5.9)	451	(6.0)	469	(6.2)	467	(8.0)
Prison	219	(2.8)	204	(2.7)	149	(1.9)	71	(1.0)	134	(1.8)	178	(2.4)	172	(3.0)

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

Table 3: Polydrug use in cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
Alcohol only	6252	(80.6)	6196	(81.3)	6315	(82.6)	5898	(80.2)	5861	(78.5)	5976	(79.2)	4477	(76.9)
Reported other additional drug(s)	1508	(19.4)	1422	(18.7)	1328	(17.4)	1452	(19.8)	1603	(21.5)	1570	(20.8)	1347	(23.1)



Table 4: 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	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>1508</b>		<b>1422</b>		<b>1328</b>		<b>1452</b>		<b>1603</b>		<b>1570</b>		<b>1347</b>	
Cannabis	953	(63.2)	852	(59.9)	766	(57.7)	878	(60.5)	940	(58.6)	881	(56.1)	740	(54.9)
Cocaine	426	(28.2)	462	(32.5)	470	(35.4)	607	(41.8)	772	(48.2)	844	(53.8)	729	(54.1)
Benzodiazepines	421	(27.9)	357	(25.1)	380	(28.6)	332	(22.9)	375	(23.4)	342	(21.8)	331	(24.6)
Opioids	230	(15.3)	200	(14.1)	202	(15.2)	207	(14.3)	212	(13.2)	206	(13.1)	156	(11.6)
MDMA (ecstasy)	173	(11.5)	142	(10.0)	99	(7.5)	134	(9.2)	185	(11.5)	146	(9.3)	104	(7.7)
Amphetamines	57	(3.8)	66	(4.6)	51	(3.8)	49	(3.4)	57	(3.6)	46	(2.9)	38	(2.8)
Novel psychoactive substances	18	(1.2)	27	(1.9)	30	(2.3)	18	(1.2)	15	(0.9)	20	(1.3)	24	(1.8)
Z Drugs*	38	(2.5)	39	(2.7)	33	(2.5)	27	(1.9)	19	(1.2)	18	(1.1)	17	(1.3)
Volatile inhalants	7	(0.5)	~	~	~	~	6	(0.4)	~	~	~	~	~	~
Other	48	(3.2)	27	(1.9)	38	(2.9)	62	(4.3)	71	(4.4)	70	(4.5)	43	(3.2)
<b>New cases</b>	<b>678</b>		<b>625</b>		<b>593</b>		<b>656</b>		<b>635</b>		<b>659</b>		<b>570</b>	
Cannabis	442	(65.2)	385	(61.6)	340	(57.3)	408	(62.2)	390	(61.4)	394	(59.8)	325	(57.0)
Cocaine	201	(29.6)	225	(36.0)	221	(37.3)	290	(44.2)	331	(52.1)	365	(55.4)	335	(58.8)
Benzodiazepines	158	(23.3)	109	(17.4)	149	(25.1)	122	(18.6)	106	(16.7)	111	(16.8)	101	(17.7)
Opioids	75	(11.1)	50	(8.0)	62	(10.5)	63	(9.6)	45	(7.1)	46	(7.0)	40	(7.0)
MDMA (ecstasy)	84	(12.4)	72	(11.5)	57	(9.6)	57	(8.7)	77	(12.1)	64	(9.7)	55	(9.6)
Amphetamines	21	(3.1)	28	(4.5)	19	(3.2)	22	(3.4)	22	(3.5)	21	(3.2)	17	(3.0)
Novel psychoactive substances	~	~	14	(2.2)	10	(1.7)	8	(1.2)	~	~	6	(0.9)	8	(1.4)
Z Drugs*	13	(1.9)	9	(1.4)	7	(1.2)	13	(2.0)	~	~	~	~	0	0
Volatile inhalants	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	~	0	0	~	~	~	~
Other	21	(3.1)	10	(1.6)	18	(3.0)	29	(4.4)	21	(3.3)	27	(4.1)	24	(4.2)

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

~ Cells with five cases or fewer

## Level of problem alcohol use

In 2020, the median age at which cases commenced alcohol use was 16 years (**Table 5**).

Over the period, the majority (66.1%) were classified as **alcohol dependent** (by the health care professional treating them).

The proportion of new cases (those who have never been treated for problem alcohol use before) which were classified as alcohol dependent decreased from a peak of 66.8% in 2017 to 57.2% in 2020.

**Hazardous:** a pattern of alcohol use that increases the risk of harmful consequences for the user. The term describes drinking over the recommended limits by a person who has no apparent alcohol-related health problems. Includes experimental drinking. [AUDIT score 8 – 15: Increasing risk]<sup>9</sup>

**Harmful:** a pattern of use that results in damage to physical or mental health; can include negative social consequences. [AUDIT score 16 – 19: High risk]<sup>9</sup>

**Dependent:** a cluster of behavioural, cognitive, and physiological symptoms. Typically, includes a strong desire to consume alcohol, impaired control over its use, persistent drinking despite harmful consequences, a higher priority given to drinking than to other activities and obligations, increased alcohol tolerance. Also, notably a physical withdrawal reaction when alcohol use is discontinued. [AUDIT score 20+: Possible dependence]<sup>9</sup>

Table 5: Age first started drinking and level of problem alcohol use, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
Median age first started drinking (range <sup>10</sup> )	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	15	12-22	16	12-21	16	12-21
<b>Level of problem alcohol use*</b>														
Hazardous	851	(11.0)	673	(8.8)	748	(9.8)	711	(9.7)	746	(10.0)	864	(11.4)	807	(13.9)
Harmful	1417	(18.3)	1396	(18.3)	1279	(16.7)	1174	(16.0)	1236	(16.6)	1374	(18.2)	1087	(18.7)
Dependent	4644	(59.8)	4719	(62.0)	4957	(64.9)	5290	(72.0)	5300	(71.0)	5142	(68.1)	3768	(64.7)
<b>New cases</b>	<b>3772</b>		<b>3553</b>		<b>3677</b>		<b>3500</b>		<b>3230</b>		<b>3296</b>		<b>2490</b>	
Median age first started drinking (range <sup>10</sup> )	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22	16	12-22
<b>Level of problem alcohol use*</b>														
Hazardous	494	(13.1)	370	(10.4)	426	(11.6)	412	(11.8)	385	(11.9)	406	(12.3)	376	(15.1)
Harmful	858	(22.7)	802	(22.6)	731	(19.9)	674	(19.3)	677	(21.0)	714	(21.7)	633	(25.4)
Dependent	2008	(53.2)	2026	(57.0)	2212	(60.2)	2339	(66.8)	2118	(65.6)	2129	(64.6)	1425	(57.2)
<b>Previously treated cases</b>	<b>3807</b>		<b>3946</b>		<b>3783</b>		<b>3652</b>		<b>3705</b>		<b>3400</b>		<b>3170</b>	
Median age first started drinking (range <sup>10</sup> )	15	11-23	15	12-22	15	12-22	15	12-22	15	11-22	15	12-21	16	12-21
<b>Level of problem alcohol use*</b>														
Hazardous	324	(8.5)	285	(7.2)	300	(7.9)	277	(7.6)	297	(8.0)	330	(9.7)	397	(12.5)
Hazardous	543	(14.3)	572	(14.5)	515	(13.6)	445	(12.2)	479	(12.9)	450	(13.2)	417	(13.2)
Dependent	2537	(66.6)	2633	(66.7)	2649	(70.0)	2865	(78.5)	2847	(76.8)	2561	(75.3)	2284	(72.1)
<b>Treatment status unknown</b>	<b>181</b>		<b>117</b>		<b>182</b>		<b>198</b>		<b>529</b>		<b>850</b>		<b>164</b>	

\* Where recorded. The proportion of cases where level of alcohol use is not known is not shown in the table.

## Socio-demographic characteristics

- The median age at which cases entered treatment has remained stable since 2015, at 41 years (**Table 6**).
- The proportion of cases aged 17 years or younger has decreased from 2.1% in 2014 to 1.7% in 2020.
- The majority of cases in 2020 were male (61.9%), similar to previous years.
- The proportion of cases recorded as homeless increased from 6.4% in 2014 to 8.5% in 2020.
- In 2020, 2.1% of cases identified as Irish Traveller.<sup>11</sup>
- In 2020, 21.2% of cases reported ceasing education (for the first time) before the age of 16 years.
- Just under half of reported cases were unemployed, this rate decreased over the reporting period from 56.4% in 2014 to 49.2% 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, 17.4% (1,015) of cases treated for alcohol were *residing with children*<sup>12</sup> aged 17 years or younger. The majority were females (57.4%, 583), while males accounted for 42.6% (432).
- A similar number of cases (17.6% or 1,027 cases) treated for alcohol in 2020 had children aged 17 years or younger who were *not residing with them*.<sup>13</sup> Almost three quarters of these cases (72.4% or 744 cases) were males, and a quarter were females (27.6% or 283 cases).



**41 years**  
median  
treatment  
age



**16 years**  
median age  
first started  
drinking



**9%**  
homeless



**49%**  
unemployed

Table 6: Socio-demographic characteristics of cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
Median age (range10)	40	20-63	41	21-64	41	21-64	41	21-64	41	21-65	41	22-64	41	21-64
Under 18	163	(2.1)	103	(1.4)	124	(1.6)	112	(1.5)	114	(1.5)	107	(1.4)	99	(1.7)
Male	4966	(64.0)	4961	(65.1)	4884	(63.9)	4769	(64.9)	4812	(64.5)	4835	(64.1)	3604	(61.9)
Homeless	494	(6.4)	572	(7.5)	613	(8.0)	620	(8.4)	713	(9.6)	654	(8.7)	494	(8.5)
Traveller	208	(2.7)	141	(1.9)	161	(2.1)	118	(1.6)	145	(1.9)	178	(2.4)	121	(2.1)
Education ceased before 16 years	1991	(25.7)	1965	(25.8)	1808	(23.7)	1726	(23.5)	1727	(23.1)	1739	(23.0)	1235	(21.2)
In paid employment	1628	(21.0)	1724	(22.6)	1889	(24.7)	2056	(28.0)	2067	(27.7)	2125	(28.2)	1639	(28.1)
Unemployed	4377	(56.4)	4215	(55.3)	4110	(53.8)	3827	(52.1)	3783	(50.7)	3731	(49.4)	2865	(49.2)
Retired/unable to work including disability	912	(11.8)	925	(12.1)	964	(12.6)	887	(12.1)	958	(12.8)	1004	(13.3)	848	(14.6)
<b>New cases</b>	<b>3772</b>		<b>3553</b>		<b>3678</b>		<b>3500</b>		<b>3230</b>		<b>3296</b>		<b>2490</b>	
Median age (range10)	39	19-63	39	20-64	40	20-64	40	19-64	39	19-65	40	20-65	40	19-64
Under 18	125	(3.3)	83	(2.3)	87	(2.4)	90	(2.6)	87	(2.7)	83	(2.5)	82	(3.3)
Male	2420	(64.2)	2279	(64.1)	2290	(62.3)	2234	(63.8)	2087	(64.6)	2080	(63.1)	1498	(60.2)
Homeless	156	(4.1)	148	(4.2)	160	(4.4)	166	(4.7)	191	(5.9)	207	(6.3)	149	(6.0)
Traveller	104	(2.8)	60	(1.7)	78	(2.1)	50	(1.4)	59	(1.8)	73	(2.2)	46	(1.8)
Education ceased before 16 years	882	(23.4)	815	(22.9)	768	(20.9)	768	(21.9)	639	(19.8)	716	(21.7)	464	(18.6)
In paid employment	962	(25.5)	1014	(28.5)	1176	(32.0)	1209	(34.5)	1165	(36.1)	1116	(33.9)	890	(35.7)
Unemployed	1916	(50.8)	1725	(48.6)	1690	(45.9)	1587	(45.3)	1417	(43.9)	1458	(44.2)	1069	(42.9)
Retired/unable to work including disability	410	(10.9)	384	(10.8)	404	(11.0)	367	(10.5)	354	(11.0)	390	(11.8)	278	(11.2)
<b>Previously treated cases</b>	<b>3807</b>		<b>3948</b>		<b>3783</b>		<b>3652</b>		<b>3705</b>		<b>3400</b>		<b>3170</b>	
Median age (range10)	41	22-63	42	23-64	43	24-64	43	24-64	42	23-65	42	24-65	43	25-64
Under 18	33	(0.9)	19	(0.5)	20	(0.5)	17	(0.5)	20	(0.5)	15	(0.4)	13	(0.4)
Male	2420	(63.6)	2599	(65.8)	2480	(65.6)	2394	(65.6)	2382	(64.3)	2249	(66.1)	1997	(63.0)
Homeless	325	(8.5)	405	(10.3)	433	(11.4)	432	(11.8)	473	(12.8)	378	(11.1)	325	(10.3)
Traveller	96	(2.5)	77	(2.0)	70	(1.9)	62	(1.7)	67	(1.8)	81	(2.4)	68	(2.1)
Education ceased before 16 years	1072	(28.2)	1124	(28.5)	1003	(26.5)	912	(25.0)	957	(25.8)	847	(24.9)	734	(23.2)
In paid employment	638	(16.8)	688	(17.4)	674	(17.8)	804	(22.0)	778	(21.0)	744	(21.9)	726	(22.9)
Unemployed	2357	(61.9)	2423	(61.4)	2331	(61.6)	2145	(58.7)	2109	(56.9)	1914	(56.3)	1709	(53.9)
Retired/unable to work including disability	482	(12.7)	527	(13.3)	540	(14.3)	498	(13.6)	535	(14.4)	502	(14.8)	538	(17.0)

## Focus on gender

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This section focuses on gender and socio-demographic characteristics of cases treated for alcohol as the main problem in 2020 (**Table 7**).

### Females

- The median age of female cases that entered treatment was 43 years. Among new female cases specifically, the median age entering treatment was 41 years.
- Among female cases, 32.6% were aged 50 years or over.
- Almost 5.0% of female cases were homeless (4.8%).
- The proportion of female cases reporting problem use of other drugs in addition to alcohol was 17.0%. The most common additional drugs were cocaine and cannabis. Problem cocaine use among women increased from 45.8% in 2019 to 50.3% in 2020. Rates of benzodiazepines and opioid use are more common among females than males.
- In 2020, 63.2% of female cases were classified as alcohol dependent.
- In 2020, the preferred types of alcohol among female cases were spirits (35.2%) and wine (34.6%).
- Among the majority of cases who had consumed alcohol in the month prior to treatment, the median number of standard drinks consumed on a typical drinking day was 16 (range 6–30) for females. The risk of harm from alcohol use increases in line with the amount consumed. The low-risk drinking guidelines for females **is up to 11 standard drinks in a week** with drinks spaced out over the week, with two to three alcohol free days per week.<sup>14</sup>
- Among those previously treated for alcohol, where alcohol detox history was known, 70.2% of female cases had previously received an alcohol detox.

### Additional problem drug – all cases



### Males

- The median age of male cases that entered treatment was 40 years. Among new cases specifically, the median age entering treatment was 38 years.
- One-in-four (25.7%) male cases were aged 50 years or over.
- One-in-ten male cases were homeless (10.7%).
- One-in-four male cases (26.9%) reported problem use of other drugs in addition to alcohol. The common additional drugs were cannabis and cocaine.
- In 2020, 65.6% of male cases were classified as alcohol dependent.
- In 2020, the most common preferred types of alcohol among male cases were beer (40.2%) and spirits (36.7%).
- Among the majority who had consumed alcohol in the month prior to treatment, the median number of standard drinks consumed on a typical drinking day was 20 (range 8–40) for males. The risk of harm from alcohol use increases in line with the amount consumed. Low risk drinking guidelines for males is **up to 17 standard drinks in a week** with drinks spaced out over the week, with two to three alcohol free days per week.<sup>14</sup>
- Among those previously treated for alcohol, where alcohol detox history was known, 73.8% of male cases had previously received an alcohol detox.

Table 7: Socio-demographic and polydrug characteristics by gender for alcohol as a main problem, NDTRS 2020

	Male		Female	
	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>3604</b>	<b>(61.9)</b>	<b>2217</b>	<b>(38.1)</b>
Median age (range <sup>10</sup> )	40	22-63	43	20-65
Under 35	1153	(32.0)	564	(25.4)
35-49	1517	(42.1)	922	(41.6)
50+	928	(25.7)	722	(32.6)
Median age (first used alcohol)	15	12-20	16	12-24
Traveller	83	(2.3)	38	(1.7)
Education ceased before 16	861	(23.9)	374	(16.9)
In paid employment	1018	(28.2)	621	(28.0)
Unemployed	1865	(51.7)	999	(45.1)
Homeless	386	(10.7)	107	(4.8)
Dependent alcohol use	2364	(65.6)	1402	(63.2)
<i>Reported other additional drug(s)</i>	<i>970</i>	<i>(26.9)</i>	<i>376</i>	<i>(17.0)</i>
<i>Cannabis</i>	<i>567</i>	<i>(58.5)</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>(46.0)</i>
<i>Cocaine</i>	<i>539</i>	<i>(55.6)</i>	<i>189</i>	<i>(50.3)</i>
<i>Benzodiazepines</i>	<i>227</i>	<i>(23.4)</i>	<i>104</i>	<i>(27.7)</i>
<i>Opioids</i>	<i>101</i>	<i>(10.4)</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>(14.6)</i>
<b>New cases</b>	<b>1498</b>		<b>991</b>	
Median age (range <sup>10</sup> )	38	20-62	41	18-64
Under 35	568	(37.9)	309	(31.2)
35-49	589	(39.3)	389	(39.2)
50+	340	(22.7)	292	(29.5)
Median age (first used alcohol)	15	12-20	16	12-24
Traveller	35	(2.3)	11	(1.1)
Education ceased before 16	321	(21.4)	143	(14.4)
In paid employment	547	(36.5)	343	(34.6)
Unemployed	676	(45.1)	393	(39.7)
Homeless	112	(7.5)	37	(3.7)
Dependent alcohol use	899	(60.0)	526	(53.1)
<i>Reported other additional drug(s)</i>				
<i>Cannabis</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>(60.4)</i>	<i>81</i>	<i>(48.8)</i>
<i>Cocaine</i>	<i>243</i>	<i>(60.1)</i>	<i>92</i>	<i>(55.4)</i>
<i>Benzodiazepines</i>	<i>62</i>	<i>(15.3)</i>	<i>39</i>	<i>(23.5)</i>
<i>Opioids</i>	<i>23</i>	<i>(5.7)</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>(10.2)</i>



## Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) area of residence

In 2020, the highest number of cases treated for problem alcohol use **resided**<sup>15</sup> in CHO 5 (**Table 8**) (see below for reference to areas included in each CHO). The number of cases fluctuated for all CHOs over the period.

It should be noted, however, that poor levels of participation in the NDTRS by alcohol services in some areas affects this geographic analysis. A breakdown of alcohol cases by county of residence is presented in Appendix A.

Table 8: Number of cases treated for alcohol as a main problem, by CHO area of residence, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>	<b>7618</b>	<b>7643</b>	<b>7350</b>	<b>7464</b>	<b>7546</b>	<b>5824</b>
CHO 1	765	870	945	952	896	1000	793
CHO 2	400	430	452	395	398	438	251
CHO 3	504	489	507	487	536	570	424
CHO 4	1617	1365	1411	1242	1293	1290	943
CHO 5	1311	1349	1264	1316	1356	1280	979
CHO 6	345	314	245	298	341	329	317
CHO 7	976	873	800	842	912	894	743
CHO 8	971	880	856	727	635	649	431
CHO 9	707	852	912	882	933	999	848
Other/unknown	164	196	251	209	164	97	95

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
<b>New cases</b>	<b>3772</b>	<b>3553</b>	<b>3678</b>	<b>3500</b>	<b>3230</b>	<b>3296</b>	<b>2490</b>
CHO 1	402	430	487	434	303	446	289
CHO 2	198	188	227	216	158	215	96
CHO 3	248	247	256	234	253	294	181
CHO 4	749	646	694	641	579	569	424
CHO 5	624	619	586	630	632	570	386
CHO 6	183	154	108	152	174	141	158
CHO 7	445	383	360	355	366	378	313
CHO 8	533	440	435	360	306	332	237
CHO 9	335	379	427	404	391	319	354
Other/unknown	55	67	98	74	68	32	52
<b>Previously treated</b>	<b>3807</b>	<b>3948</b>	<b>3783</b>	<b>3652</b>	<b>3705</b>	<b>3400</b>	<b>3170</b>
CHO 1	359	431	434	477	489	476	482
CHO 2	198	240	218	177	195	195	152
CHO 3	238	236	247	248	246	257	235
CHO 4	846	710	690	594	654	668	512
CHO 5	675	723	661	658	638	632	586
CHO 6	147	150	127	134	157	132	143
CHO 7	488	468	412	453	490	381	384
CHO 8	405	427	411	339	290	252	189
CHO 9	350	445	447	447	468	363	450
Other/unknown	101	118	136	125	78	44	37

**LHO areas in each Community Healthcare Organisation area:**

- CHO 1 – Donegal LHO, Sligo/Leitrim/West Cavan 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

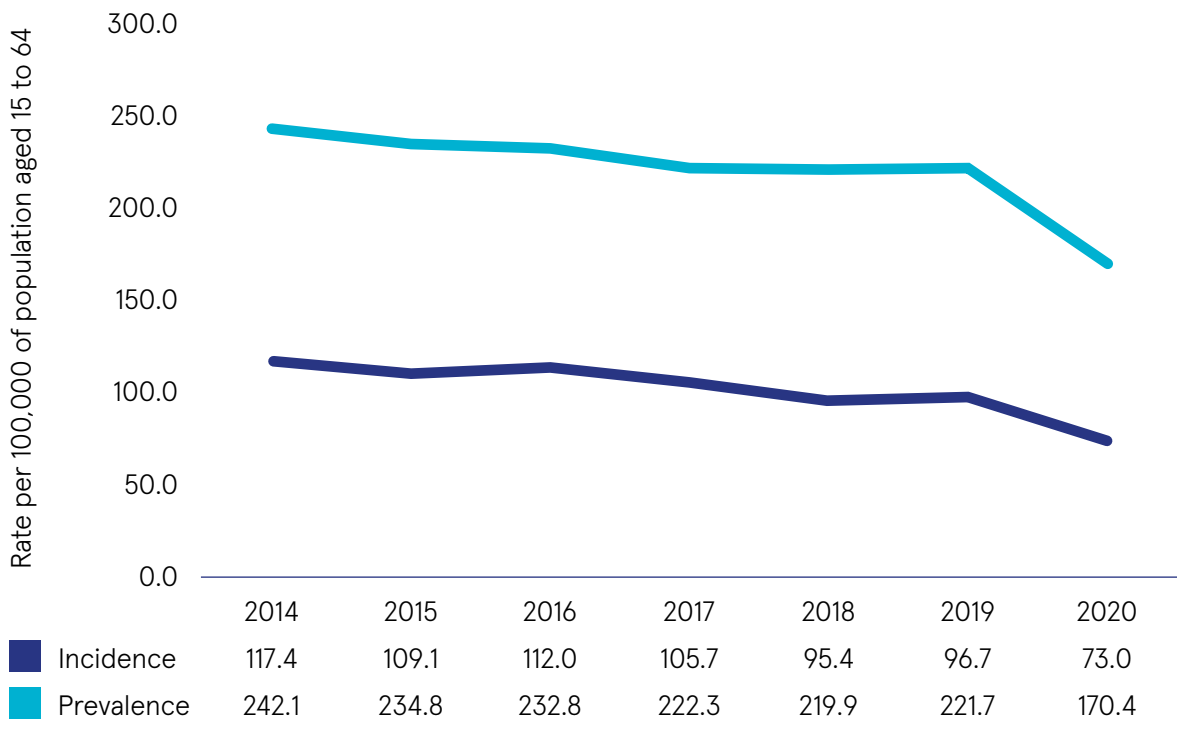
Annual rates for the incidence (new cases) and prevalence (all cases) of treated problem alcohol use were calculated per 100,000 of the population age 15 to 64 years based on census figures from the Central Statistics Office (CSO)<sup>16</sup> **(Figure 1)**.

Incidence decreased from 117.4 cases per 100,000 in 2014, to 73.0 cases in 2020.

Prevalence, which includes both new cases and those cases returning to treatment, also decreased from 242.1 cases per 100,000 in 2014 to 170.4 cases per 100,000 in 2020.

Changes in incidence and prevalence should be interpreted with caution for recent years due to the proportion of cases where treatment status was unknown, and the challenges presented to service providers and those who avail of services due to COVID-19 in 2020.

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



## 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

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1. This document may be cited as: O'Neill D, Carew AM, and Lyons S (2020) *Alcohol Treatment in Ireland 2014 to 2020*. HRB StatLink Series 7. Dublin: Health Research Board. Available at: [www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34164](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34164) and at [www.hrb.ie/publications](http://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/data-collections-evidence/alcohol-and-drug-treatment/publications/](http://www.hrb.ie/data-collections-evidence/alcohol-and-drug-treatment/publications/)
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/](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/tables/)
7. It must be noted that not all alcohol treatment services were participating in the NDTRS during the period under review. Therefore, it may be assumed that the data presented in this bulletin under-estimates the true extent of treated alcohol use in Ireland.
8. Coverage of services was 71.1% for 2020. The NDTRS make every attempt to ensure as complete coverage of services as possible. However, the number of services participating in the reporting system varies annually, making small fluctuations in the numbers of cases more difficult to interpret.
9. Babor Thomas, Higgins-Biddle John, Saunders John, and Monteiro Maristela (2001) AUDIT The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test Guidelines for Use in Primary Care: Second Edition. Geneva: World Health Organization <https://www.who.int/publications-detail/audit-the-alcohol-use-disorders-identification-test-guidelines-for-use-in-primary-health-care>
10. Age range presented is 5th percentile to 95th percentile (90% of cases are included within this range).

11. Based on the 2016 Census, the proportion of Irish Travellers in the general population is 0.7% (Central Statistics Office, 2019)  
[www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8e/](http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8e/)
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. Drink guidelines are taken from the Health Service Executive (HSE) at [www.hse.ie/eng/health/hl/change/alcohol/](http://www.hse.ie/eng/health/hl/change/alcohol/)
15. 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.
16. Population data is taken from the Central Statistics Office at <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2020/>

## Appendix A: Number of alcohol cases treated, by county, NDTRS 2014 to 2020

	2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)
<b>All cases</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	
Carlow	127	(1.6)	117	(1.5)	86	(1.1)	99	(1.3)	100	(1.3)	82	(1.1)	54	(0.9)
Cavan	55	(0.7)	100	(1.3)	91	(1.2)	89	(1.2)	78	(1.0)	94	(1.2)	67	(1.2)
Clare	121	(1.6)	138	(1.8)	127	(1.7)	91	(1.2)	106	(1.4)	111	(1.5)	87	(1.5)
Cork	1222	(15.7)	985	(12.9)	1020	(13.3)	930	(12.7)	972	(13.0)	963	(12.8)	719	(12.3)
Donegal	411	(5.3)	396	(5.2)	516	(6.8)	509	(6.9)	517	(6.9)	526	(7.0)	449	(7.7)
Dublin	1734	(22.3)	1804	(23.7)	1793	(23.5)	1808	(24.6)	1907	(25.5)	1921	(25.5)	1593	(27.4)
Galway	253	(3.3)	281	(3.7)	298	(3.9)	273	(3.7)	254	(3.4)	264	(3.5)	130	(2.2)
Kerry	394	(5.1)	380	(5.0)	391	(5.1)	310	(4.2)	321	(4.3)	327	(4.3)	224	(3.8)
Kildare	211	(2.7)	182	(2.4)	135	(1.8)	201	(2.7)	182	(2.4)	203	(2.7)	205	(3.5)
Kilkenny	170	(2.2)	140	(1.8)	137	(1.8)	142	(1.9)	173	(2.3)	134	(1.8)	97	(1.7)
Laois	128	(1.6)	74	(1.0)	96	(1.3)	137	(1.9)	145	(1.9)	122	(1.6)	58	(1.0)
Leitrim	70	(0.9)	75	(1.0)	76	(1.0)	53	(0.7)	59	(0.8)	107	(1.4)	71	(1.2)
Limerick	275	(3.5)	260	(3.4)	276	(3.6)	306	(4.2)	320	(4.3)	374	(5.0)	257	(4.4)
Longford	130	(1.7)	119	(1.6)	89	(1.2)	57	(0.8)	40	(0.5)	50	(0.7)	47	(0.8)
Louth	159	(2.0)	174	(2.3)	170	(2.2)	155	(2.1)	143	(1.9)	154	(2.0)	130	(2.2)
Mayo	112	(1.4)	99	(1.3)	111	(1.5)	83	(1.1)	106	(1.4)	110	(1.5)	54	(0.9)
Meath	116	(1.5)	143	(1.9)	129	(1.7)	128	(1.7)	125	(1.7)	131	(1.7)	87	(1.5)
Monaghan	52	(0.7)	77	(1.0)	97	(1.3)	108	(1.5)	73	(1.0)	50	(0.7)	67	(1.2)
Offaly	196	(2.5)	164	(2.2)	132	(1.7)	118	(1.6)	94	(1.3)	97	(1.3)	47	(0.8)
Roscommon	35	(0.5)	50	(0.7)	43	(0.6)	39	(0.5)	38	(0.5)	64	(0.8)	67	(1.2)
Sligo	177	(2.3)	222	(2.9)	166	(2.2)	197	(2.7)	175	(2.3)	224	(3.0)	139	(2.4)
Tipperary	349	(4.5)	354	(4.6)	329	(4.3)	338	(4.6)	367	(4.9)	368	(4.9)	267	(4.6)
Waterford	433	(5.6)	447	(5.9)	436	(5.7)	455	(6.2)	441	(5.9)	427	(5.7)	361	(6.2)
Wexford	340	(4.4)	382	(5.0)	380	(5.0)	374	(5.1)	385	(5.2)	354	(4.7)	280	(4.8)
Westmeath	243	(3.1)	206	(2.7)	239	(3.1)	128	(1.7)	81	(1.1)	94	(1.2)	62	(1.1)
Wicklow	168	(2.2)	159	(2.1)	123	(1.6)	140	(1.9)	180	(2.4)	161	(2.1)	166	(2.9)
Ireland unknown	27	(0.3)	28	(0.4)	102	(1.3)	39	(0.5)	33	(0.4)	8	(0.1)	8	(0.1)
Outside Ireland	52	(0.7)	62	(0.8)	55	(0.7)	43	(0.6)	49	(0.7)	26	(0.3)	31	(0.5)
<b>Total</b>	<b>7760</b>		<b>7618</b>		<b>7643</b>		<b>7350</b>		<b>7464</b>		<b>7546</b>		<b>5824</b>	



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