New HRB report examines drug use in Ireland

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A new report from the Health Research Board (HRB) presents findings from the National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS) 2019–20, which shows that more people are using illegal stimulants, smoking less, and binge drinking remains high.

The household\* survey interviewed 5,762 people in Ireland aged 15 and over, to look at what drugs people are using and how often, people’s perceptions and attitudes towards drugs, and the impact of drugs on local communities. It is the first time the HRB has conducted the survey, and the fifth survey that has been undertaken since 2002–03.

Key findings

* **One-in-fourteen** (7%) people have used an illegal drug in the last year. This hasn’t changed since the most recent survey in 2014–15.
* There has been an increase in the number of people who use **illegal stimulants** (cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines) and a small decrease in the number of people using cannabis.
* 15–24-year-olds are most likely to report drug use. **Men are twice as likely as women** to use drugs.
* A **wider range of drugs** are being used since the previous survey, with 25% of those who used drugs in the last year reporting use of **at least three different drugs** compared with 15% in 2014–15.
* **Cocaine use has increased across all age groups**. Men aged 25–34 are most likely to report cocaine use in the last year, rising from 2% in 2002–03 to 9% in 2019–20.
* Nine-in-ten people support the use of **cannabis for medical purposes**, while less than three-in-ten support recreational use.
* In areas that are most and least deprived there is little difference in the prevalence of drug use, while communities with high levels of deprivation are **disproportionately impacted** by the negative effects of drug use activities in their local area.
* There are **fewer smokers than ever before.** The current survey is the first time that the proportion of ex-smokers was found to be greater than current smokers.Health concerns, cost and health warning labels were cited as the main reasons for quitting.
* **One-in-five drinkers have an Alcohol Use Disorder** (AUD); this increases to one-in-three among drinkers aged 15–24 years.Drinkers with AUD were 13 times more likely to experience alcohol-related harm compared to low-risk drinkers.

Commenting on the findings, Dr Deirdre Mongan, Research Officer at the Health Research Board and lead author of the report, says:

*“While there has been little change since the last survey in the number of people using drugs overall, what is notable is the rise in the use of illegal stimulants, particularly cocaine and amphetamines, as well as an increase in the use of LSD and poppers. Also, people who use drugs are now more likely than before to use a wider range of drugs. By monitoring trends over time, the Health Research Board can provide solid evidence in relation to changing drug use patterns. This supports the development of targeted approaches to create awareness about the prevailing challenges of drug use, to help reduce harm and inform policy change in relation to drug use.”*

More detail on the trends observed in the survey are summarised below.

Illegal drug use

Almost one-in-four (23%) respondents have used an illegal drug at some point in their lifetime, equating to almost 900,000 adults aged 15 years and older in the general population, and one-in-fourteen (7%) reported use of an illegal drug in the last year.

Results show that illegal drug use in Ireland has plateaued since 2014–15; with notable changes reported in the types of drugs used and who uses them. There has been a significant rise in the use of stimulants (cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines) and in the use of LSD and poppers, with a small decrease reported in cannabis use. One-in-four of those who used drugs of all types reported last year use of at least three different drugs in 2019-20 (25.0%) compared to 2014–15 (15%).

Men are more than twice as likely as women to use drugs. Drug use is most common among young people, with just under one-in-five 15–24-year-olds reporting drug use in the last year. Since 2002–03, there has been a large increase in drug use among men aged 25–34, rising from 9% in 2002–03 to 26% in 2019–20. Among young women aged 15–24, drug use has doubled since 2002–03, from 8% to 16%.

Cocaine use has increased and is at its highest level among men aged 25–34

Cocaine use has doubled since 2002–03, with more men aged 25–34 using cocaine than ever before, rising from just under 2% to just over 9%.

Use of alcohol with other drugs

The survey reports that alcohol is the substance most commonly used with ecstasy, cannabis and notably, cocaine – with more than nine out of ten people who used cocaine in the last year also using alcohol at the same time. 85% of respondents who had ever used cocaine consumed alcohol on their first occasion of cocaine use.

*“Mixing drugs or polydrug use, particularly alcohol and cocaine, is a real concern because it can result in greater physical harm. It is important that we continue to monitor trends to inform public health decision-making.” -* Dr Mongan

Attitudes around use of cannabis

Almost nine-in-ten respondents support permitting cannabis for medical use, with the highest level of support reported by lifetime users of cannabis (99%). Fewer than three-in-ten support permitting cannabis for recreational use with the highest level of support reported by lifetime users of cannabis (66%).

Drug use impacts disproportionately on more deprived communities

More than one-third (37%) of respondents reported a ‘very big’ or ‘fairly big’ problem with people using or dealing drugs in their local area, this ranged from 44% in the most deprived areas compared to 20% in the least deprived areas. Commonly reported problems included drugs being too easily available, people dealing drugs, and children and teenagers taking drugs.

One-in-ten respondents (the equivalent of 390,000 people in the general population) aged 15 years and older have had either personal experience of drug-related intimidation or knew someone who had been intimidated, with numbers peaking among communities in the Dublin area. Those in deprived communities were twice as likely to experience drug-related intimidation than residents in less deprived neighbourhoods.

Speaking about the social impact of drug use, Dr Mongan highlights:

*“While there are almost equal numbers of people reporting drug use in less deprived areas as there are in deprived communities, the survey data reinforces the well-documented connection between the negative consequences of drug use and social disadvantage, and quantifies the very real, human toll of drug-related intimidation for those living in these communities.”*

Ease of access to drugs of choice

On average, nine out of ten people who use cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis are confident that it would be ‘very easy’ or ‘fairly easy’ to access their drug of choice within a 24-hour period.

Alcohol use in Ireland

Rates of hazardous and harmful drinking remain high. Two-in-five drinkers engage in heavy monthly episodic drinking (binge drinking) and one-in-five drinkers meet the criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder. Hazardous and harmful drinking patterns are most common among 15-24-year-olds, with 56% engaging in monthly binge drinking and 38% meeting the criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder.

Alcohol-related harm is most common among those with problematic drinking patterns. Those with Alcohol Use Disorder are thirteen times more likely than low-risk drinkers to experience any of the following harms – health issues, being involved in an accident or in a fight, experiencing role impairment, or negative impacts on their home life.

Positive trends

There has been an **increase in the age of first use of most illegal drugs** since 2002–03, with the median age at which people first use cannabis increasing from age 18 to age 19, and first use of cocaine increasing from age 20 to age 21.

Since the last survey, there has been a **notable drop in Cannabis Use Disorder,** particularly among men aged 15–34.

**Fewer 15–64-year-olds are smoking tobacco than ever before**, down from 33% in 2002–03 to 19% in 2019–20. This reflects a trend in the rise of non-smokers. Also, one-in-four of the population have given up smoking, motivated by health concerns (28%), cost (13%), and health warning labels (13%).

Dr Mongan says:

*“Smoking rates have now decreased by over 40% since 2002–03 when one-third of 15–64-year-olds smoked. There has also been an increase in the average age at which young people start to smoke. These positive changes in smoking are a reflection of government tobacco control policies that have been implemented, including graphic warnings on packaging, restrictions on sale, removal of point-of-sale tobacco displays and excise increases.”*

**Rise in young abstainers.** The number of people abstaining from alcohol has risen since 2002-03, with notable increases among 15–24-year-olds (from 18% to 28%) and 25–34-year-olds (from 9% to 19%). The age at which young people have their first drink has also risen from age 16 in 2002–03 to age 17 in 2019–20.

*“There has been an increase in the number of people who do not drink, and the age at which young people have their first drink has also risen. This is an encouraging finding, as the younger a person starts drinking, the more likely they are to develop Alcohol Use Disorder in adulthood. Of concern however is the high prevalence of Alcohol Use Disorder among young people who do drink.”* - Dr Mongan

**ENDS**

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The full report and supporting infographics is available for download from the HRB website. **Download full report.**

Notes to editors

\*NDAS only includes private households and consequently does not allow for people in prison or other institutionalised individuals, homeless individuals, or Travellers to be included, potentially excluding adults who may be more likely to use drugs than the general population.