

# EMERGING DRUG TRENDS & DRUG CHECKING WEBINAR 2021

Official Launch of the Report of the Emerging Drug Trends and Drug Checking Working Group 2021



European Monitoring Centre  
for Drugs and Drug Addiction



An Roinn Sláinte  
Department of Health

THE REPORT OF THE EMERGING DRUG TRENDS AND DRUG CHECKING WORKING GROUP 2021



# EMERGING DRUG TRENDS AND HEALTH RESPONSES IN NIGHTLIFE SETTINGS

Dr Eamon Keenan, Working Group Chair & National Clinical Lead-Addiction Services

# NATIONAL DRUG STRATEGY

1.3.11 Strengthen early harm reduction responses to current and emerging trends and patterns of drug use.

Establishing a working group to examine the evidence in relation to early harm reduction responses, such as drug testing, amnesty bins and media campaigns, to current and emerging trends including the use of new psychoactive substances and image and performance enhancing drugs and other high risk behaviours, including chemsex.



# EMERGING DRUG TRENDS AND DRUG CHECKING WORKING GROUP

Stakeholders include:

HSE

Department of Health

Biochemists & Toxicologists

Academics

USI

Safety Event Coordinator

Dance/Festival Community

Taskforce Coordinators

Emergency Medicine Representative

Community & Voluntary Sector

An Garda Síochána & FSI attended on an advisory basis.

# EMERGING DRUG TRENDS AND DRUG CHECKING WORKING GROUP

- Review of Available Evidence
- Subgroups Developed:
  - Subgroup 1 - Drug Checking Methodologies
  - Subgroup 2 - Medical, Educational & Safety Responses
- International Experts Presenting:
  - João Matias, EMCDDA
  - Daan van der Gouwe, Trimbos-instituut
  - Prof. Anton Luf, Medical University of Vienna

# EMERGING TRENDS & PATTERNS

Night-time Economy (NTE)

Festivals

Engagement with Young People

Increasing potency re: MDMA & Cocaine

New psychoactive substances

Adverse health consequences, especially re: Mental Health



# DRUG CHECKING

Considerations regarding:

Front of House

Back of House

Fixed Site

Amnesty Bins

Market Monitoring



# RECOMMENDATIONS



Oversight & Working  
Groups



Faster Notifications



Event Issues &  
Stakeholder  
Engagement



Research & Funding



Drug Checking &  
Monitoring



# OVERSIGHT & WORKING GROUPS



- Development of a national working group to oversee research and training.
- Formation of a national committee chaired by HSE Emergency Management to advise on the development of standardised reporting templates for emergency critical medical care at festivals and related events.
- The development of a scientific oversight network is recommended, with appropriate sourcing of a spectrum library of tested substances and facilitation of network sharing among existing laboratories.

# FASTER NOTIFICATIONS



- Evaluate and improve existing emerging drug trend reporting structures to provide real time monitoring of trends.
- Notification of identified trends and alerts to be streamlined for effective and inclusive communication.

# EVENT ISSUES & STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT



- A dedicated service/national volunteer training programme is required to provide education, prevention and harm reduction services in the nighttime economy, similar to other European services.
- Continued Government support is necessary for resource development to target nightlife cohorts through third-level and nightlife settings, as well as the progression of student and peer based education and training on drugs, harm reduction and overdose prevention.
- Festival and dance event licenses should include a requirement to provide approved drug information and harm reduction strategies, as well as liaising with health officials on appropriate communications & responses.

# RESEARCH & FUNDING



- New research, with appropriate funding support is necessary to improve local knowledge on the different populations who use drugs.
- On-going funding should be available from Government for further developments in the area of emerging drug trend monitoring.

# DRUG CHECKING & MONITORING



- Pilot a 'back of house' drug checking system in a festival setting collaborating with health care providers and other relevant stakeholders with support from the Department of Justice and An Garda Síochána. 'Front of house' approach should be considered if this pilot has positive results.
- Analytical approaches require further discussion. GC-MS methodology is the preference by Working Group experts and is recommended for drug checking. However, other methods or a mixed method approach should be explored for use at festivals and nightlife events in the interests of practicality.

# DRUG CHECKING & MONITORING



- Government consideration is required for the development of a dedicated laboratory for drug market monitoring purposes, including stationary laboratories utilising robust technologies.
- Single use reagent kits have benefits when used as part of an integrated harm reduction or drug checking service, however, the Working Group does not recommend the dissemination of these kits as a standalone harm reduction response.
- The piloting and evaluation of other analytical approaches such as wastewater analysis, pooled urine or syringe analysis can improve local monitoring and knowledge.



**DRUGS**.ie  
Drug and Alcohol Information and Support

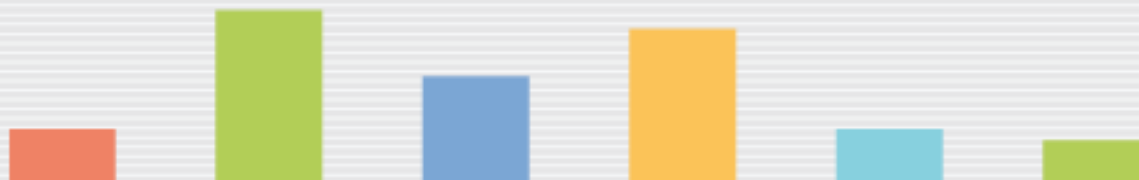




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# Recent European drug trends: the importance of a comprehensive approach

**João Matias**





# Monitoring challenges in 2021

- Big gaps in our knowledge...
- Reliability of surveys, response rates, users unaware of what they are using
- Rapidly evolving situation...
- Increasingly globalised drug market
- Growth of online and virtual drug markets
- Constant appearance of new substances
  
- Unexpected events – e.g. COVID-19



# Drug use in Europe – how to measure

## Core: National household surveys

- Face-to-face
- National prevalence data
- Mainly 'recreational' use
  - Comparability
  - EMQ

- School surveys
- Indirect methods (for those who use in a more 'problematic' way)
- Targeted surveys (eg nightlife settings, festivals...)



# Organised crime groups intensify drug production

## 370 laboratories dismantled in 2019:

Heroin                      Cocaine  
Amphetamine          Methamphetamine  
MDMA                      GHB  
NPS



# Drugs of high potency or purity create serious public health risks – importance of services like drug checking

**Cannabis resin:** average THC content 20-28%

**Cocaine:** purity continues to increase

**MDMA:** increased tablet content and powder purity; products with hazardous levels



# Patterns of use are becoming more complex

**Availability:** wider selection of substances

**Polydrug use:** can intensify harms

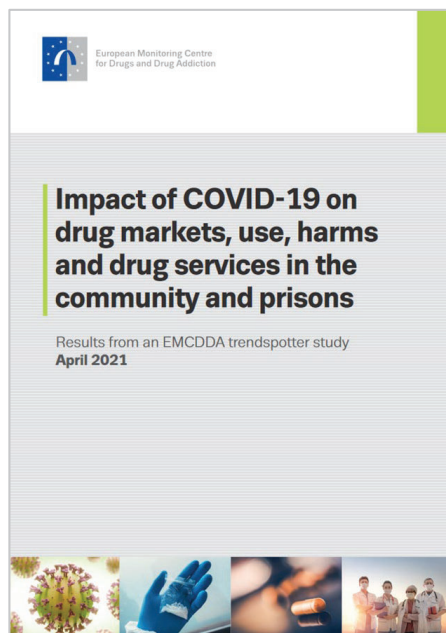
**Benzodiazepines:** increase overdose risks

**Cannabis:** potent products, new forms and ways of consuming it



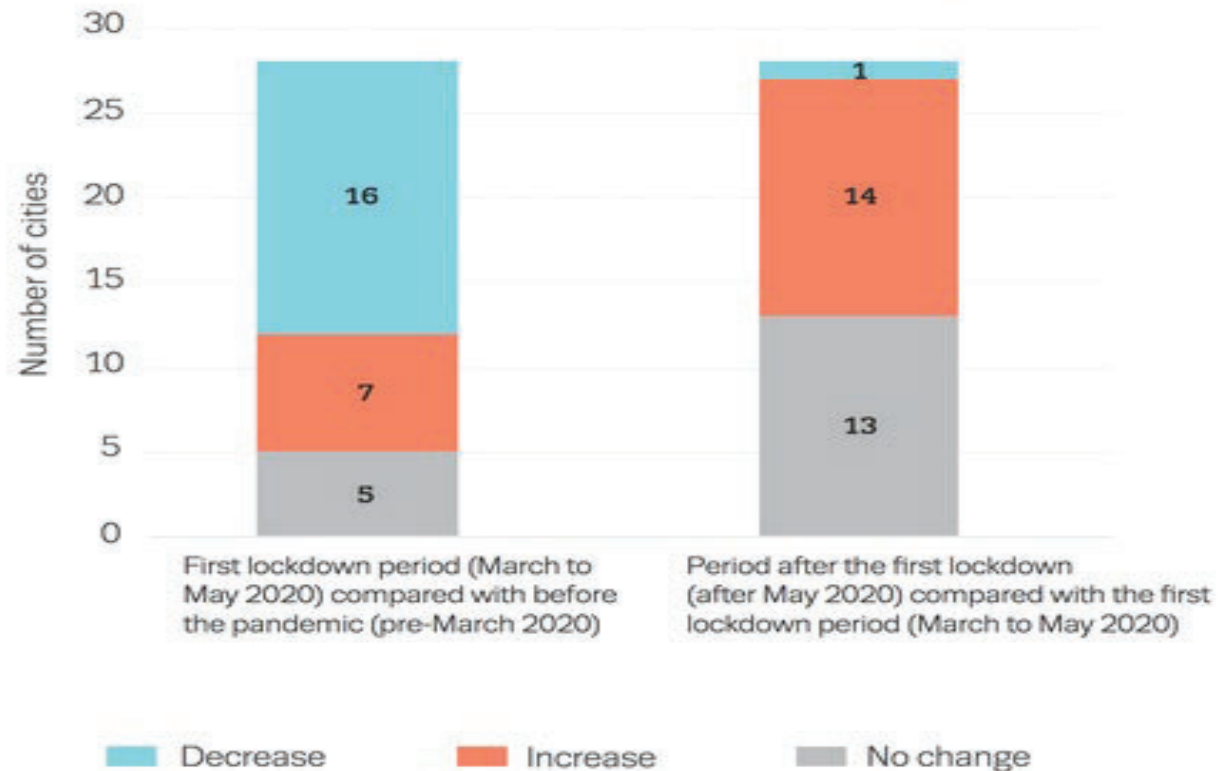
# Impact of COVID-19

- More digitally-enabled drug market
- From nightlife to homelife
- Benzodiazepines raise concerns



# Impact of COVID-19 – importance of almost real-time data sources: wastewater

Changes in benzoylecgonine (cocaine metabolite) loads from wastewater analyses in 28 European cities during the first lockdown period compared with before the pandemic (left) and after the first lockdown period (right)

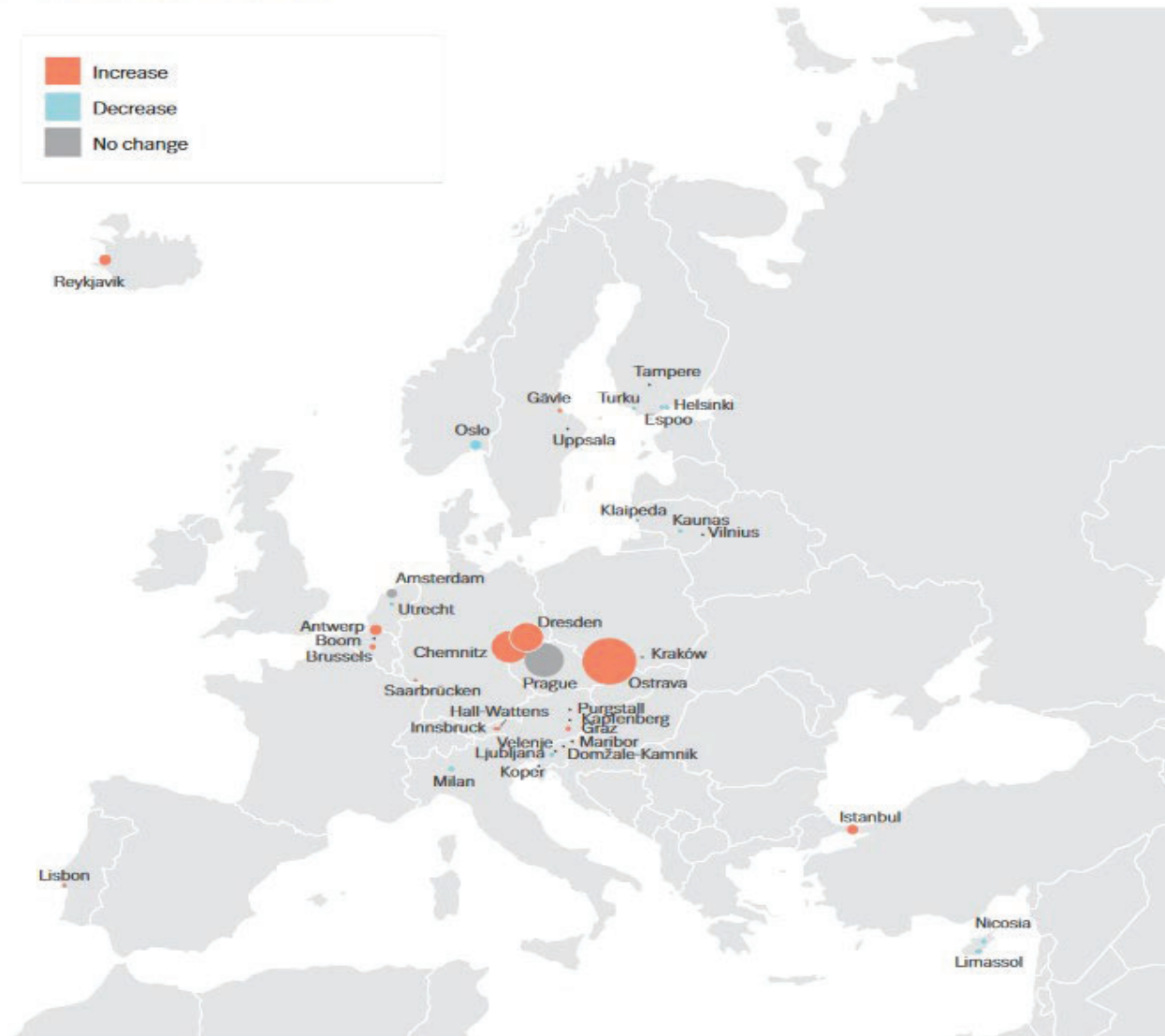


Note: The participating cities had different lockdown periods and restrictive measures in place. Changes have been considered when there was at least a 10 % change in the mean weekly amounts of benzoylecgonine in milligrams per 1 000 population per day between the different periods.



# Impact of COVID-19

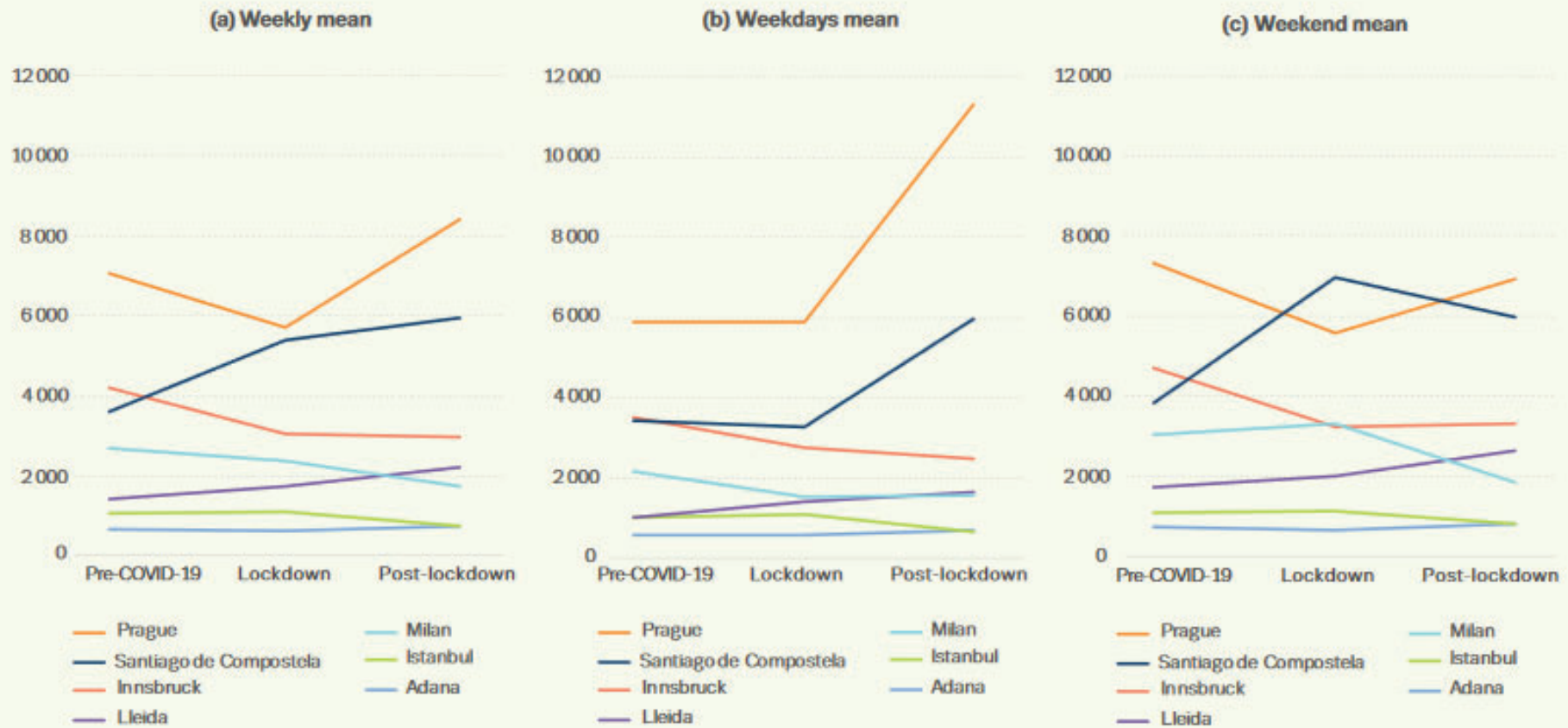
Changes in the mean weekly amounts of methamphetamine residues from wastewater analyses in selected European cities between 2019 and 2020





# Impact of COVID-19

Changes in the amounts of alcohol residues (ethyl sulphate) from wastewater analyses in seven cities before March 2020, during the first lockdown (March to May 2020) and after the first lockdown (June to December 2020): (a) mean weekly amounts, (b) mean amounts during weekdays and (c) mean amounts during weekends



# Vigilance needed to detect any increased use and harms

**HCV:** antibody prevalence in excess of 50 % in 7 of 15 countries with national data

**Drug-induced deaths:** driven by opioids and other drugs

5 784 overdose deaths involving illicit drugs in 2019 in Europe





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# [emcdda.europa.eu/edr2021](https://emcdda.europa.eu/edr2021)

## #GetTheFactsEDR2021

## #HealthierEurope #MoreSecureEurope



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# Emerging drug trends in Ireland – analysis of survey data

Deirdre Mongan

# National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS) 2019/20

# National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS) 2019/20

- Survey to measure the extent and pattern of drug use among a representative sample (n=5,762) of those aged 15 and over in Ireland.
- 2019/20 NDAS – 5<sup>th</sup> survey (previously undertaken 2002/03, 2006/07, 2010/11 and 2014/15)
- Last year drug use among 15-64-year-olds – 9.0% (8.9% 2014/15)

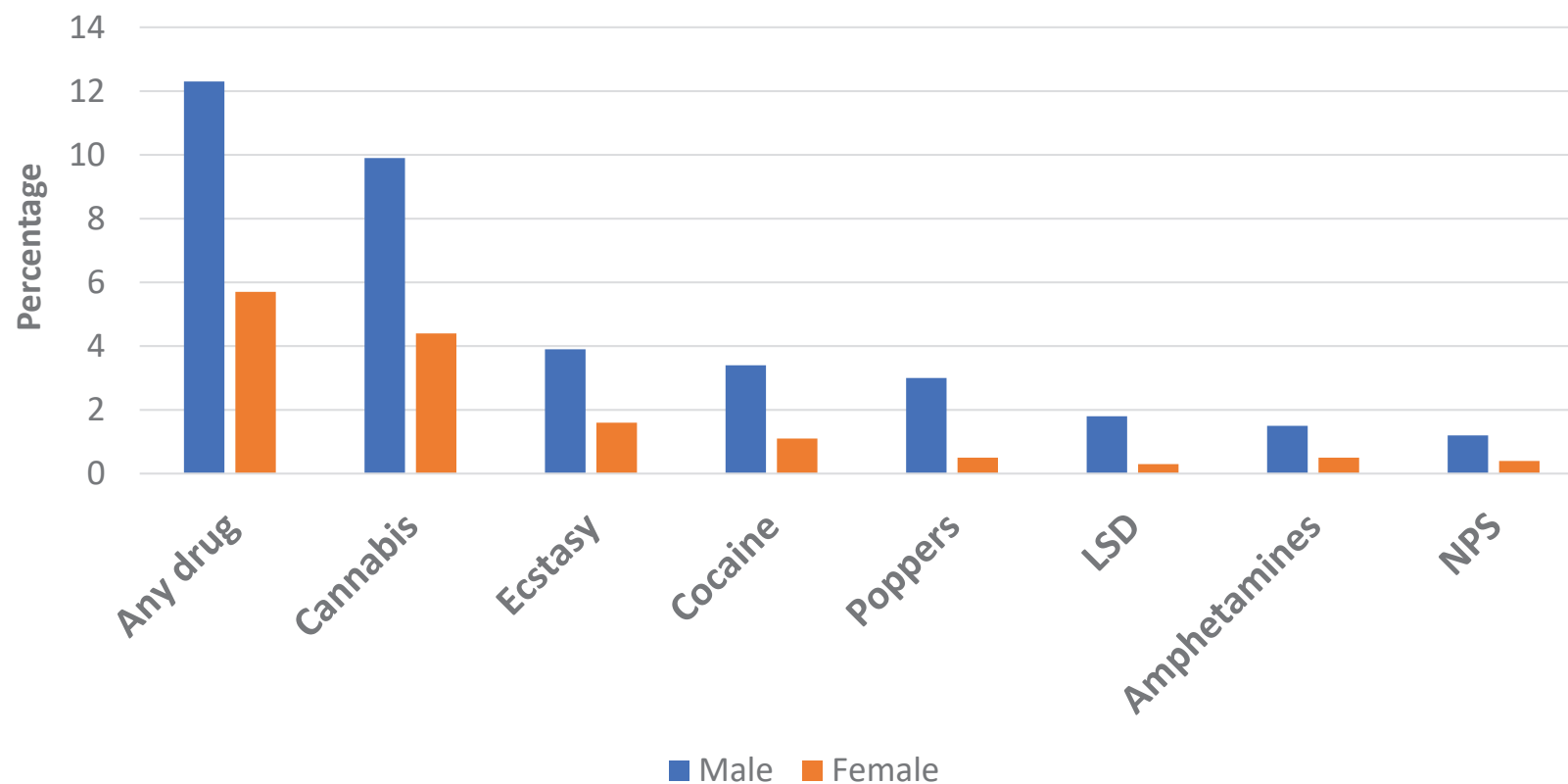
# What drugs do people in Ireland use? (15-64 years)

The most commonly used drugs in the past 12 months were:

1. Cannabis – 7.1% ↓ (7.7% in 2014/15)
2. Ecstasy – 2.7% ↑ (2.1%)
3. Cocaine powder\* – 2.3% ↑ (1.4%)
4. Poppers\* – 1.7% ↑ (0.6%)
5. LSD\* – 1.1% ↑ (0.3%)
6. Amphetamines\* – 1.0% ↑ (0.3%)

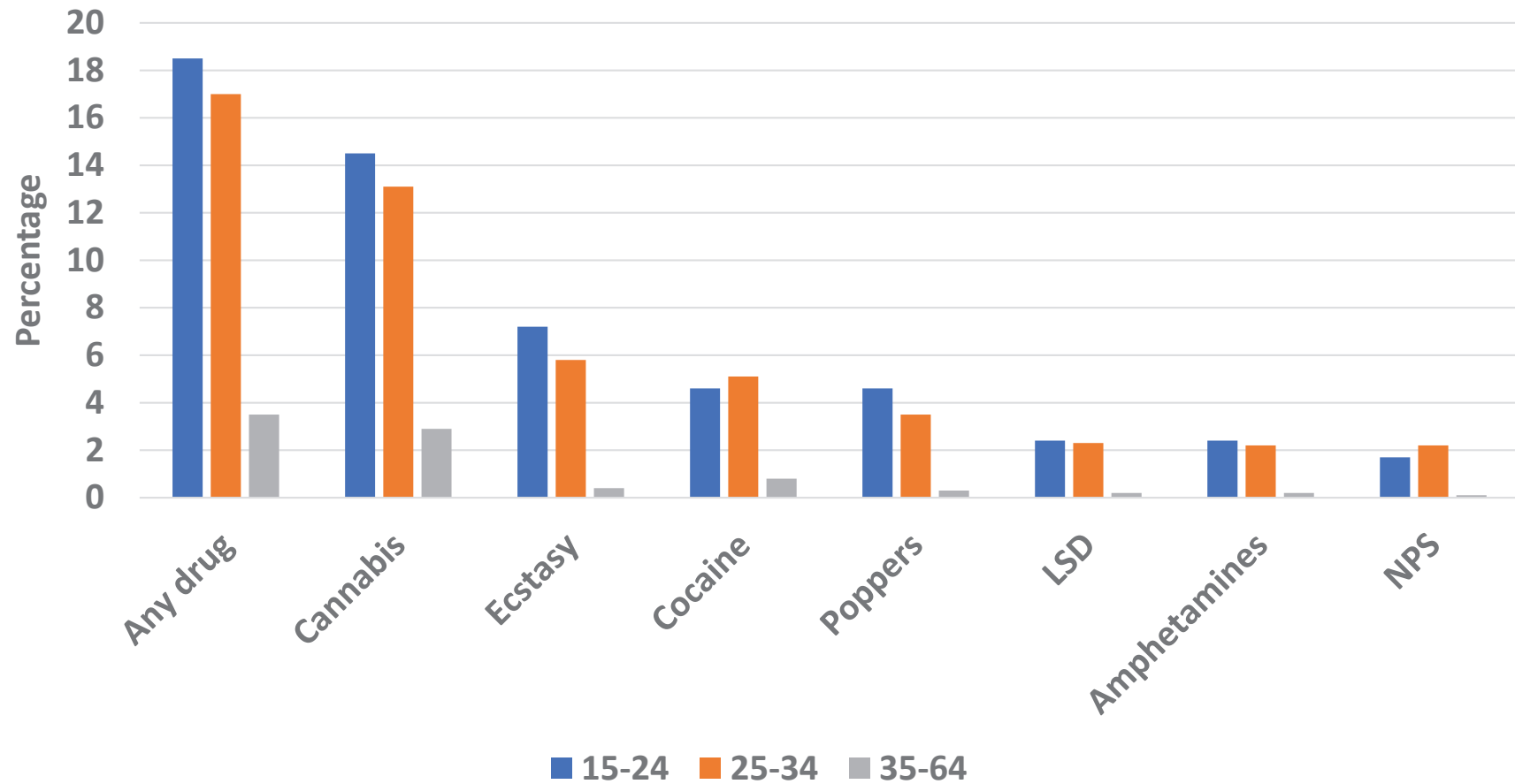
\*Statistically significant increase

# Drug use by gender (15-64 years)





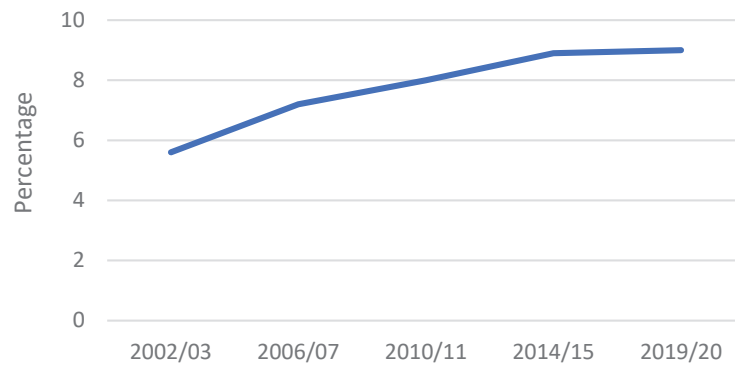
# Drug use by age



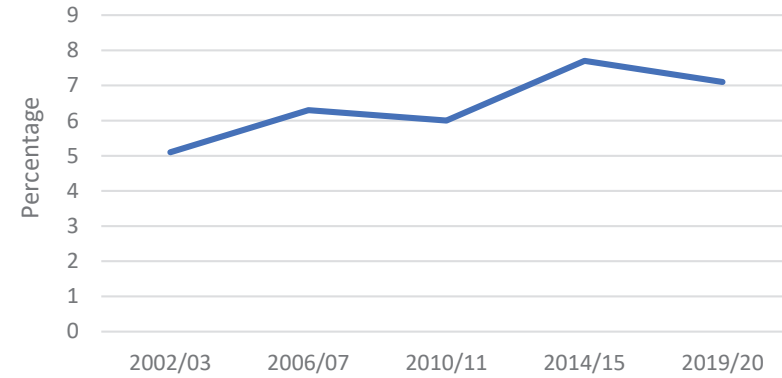
# Trends in drug use since 2002/03

# Trends in last year drug use (15-64 years)

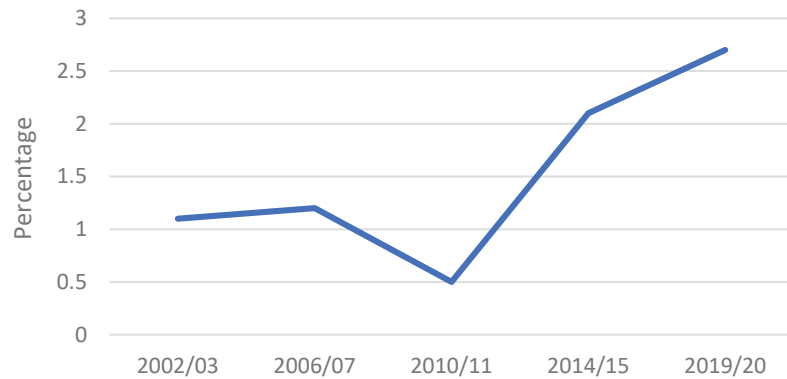
## Any illegal drug



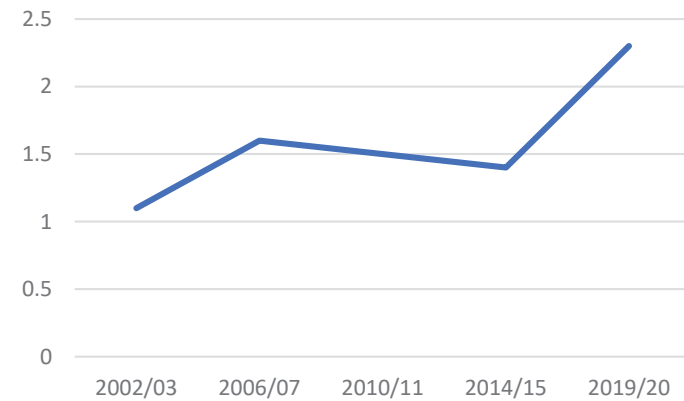
## Cannabis



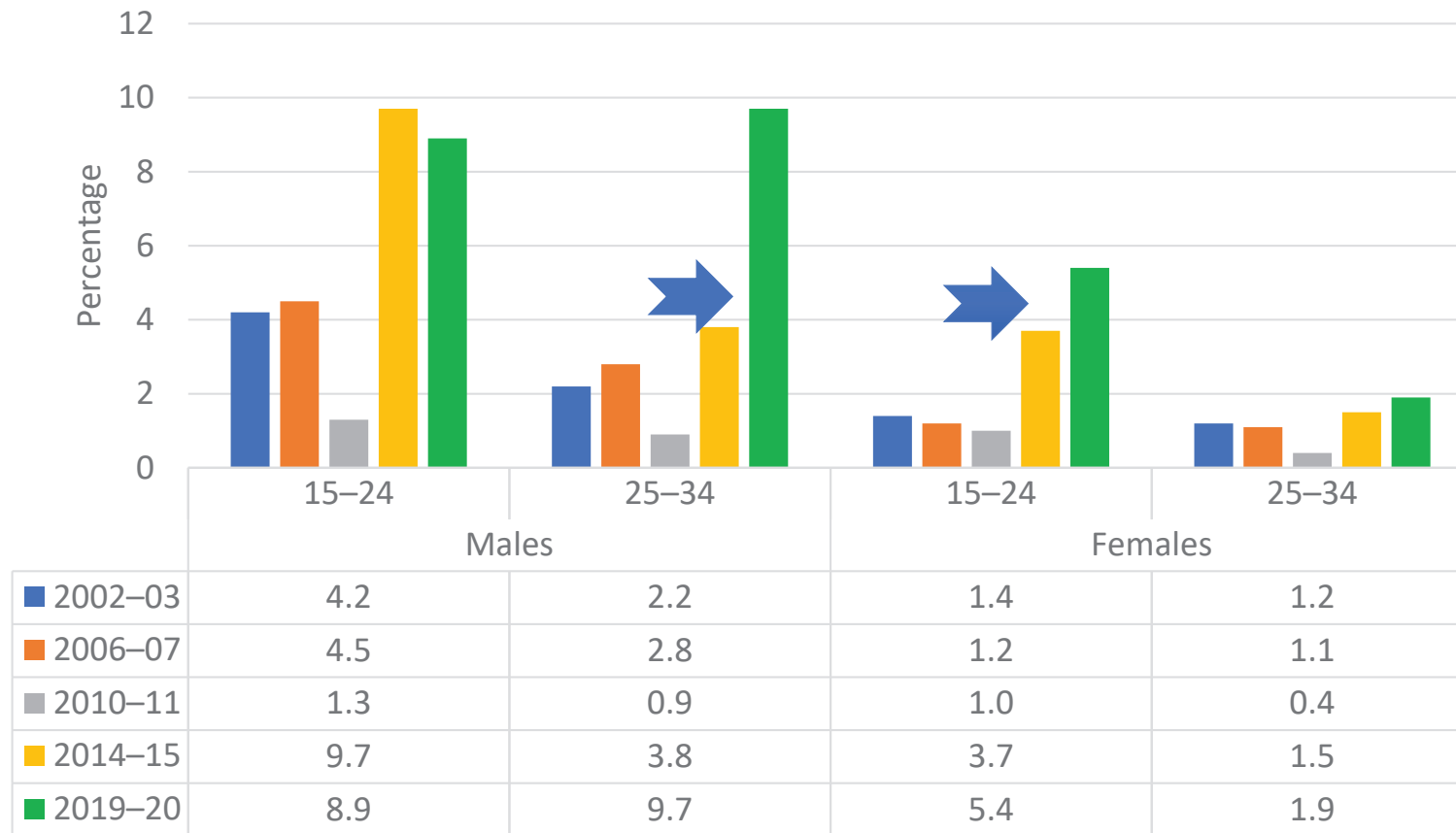
## Ecstasy



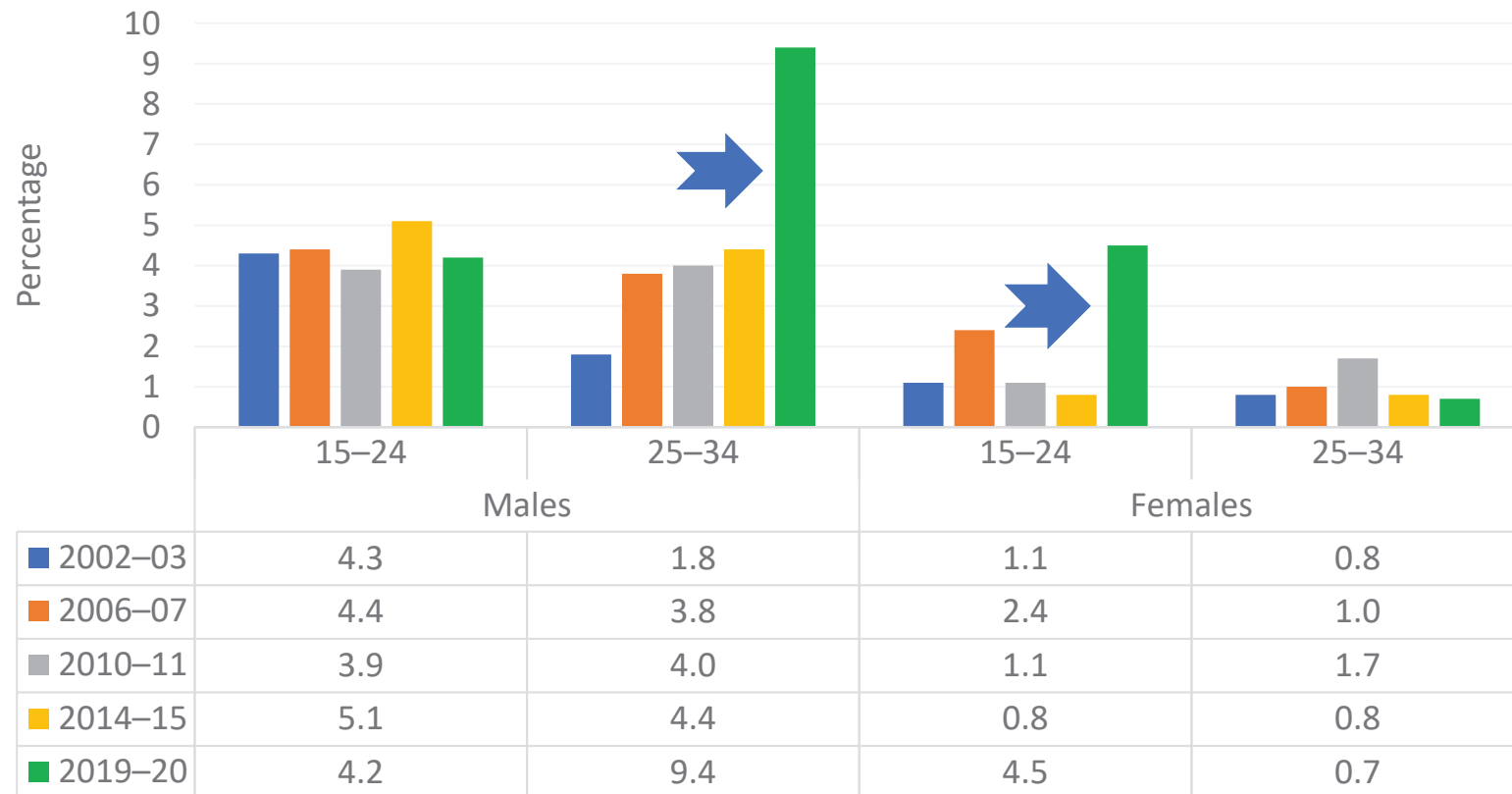
## Cocaine



# Trends in last year ecstasy use



# Trends in last year cocaine use

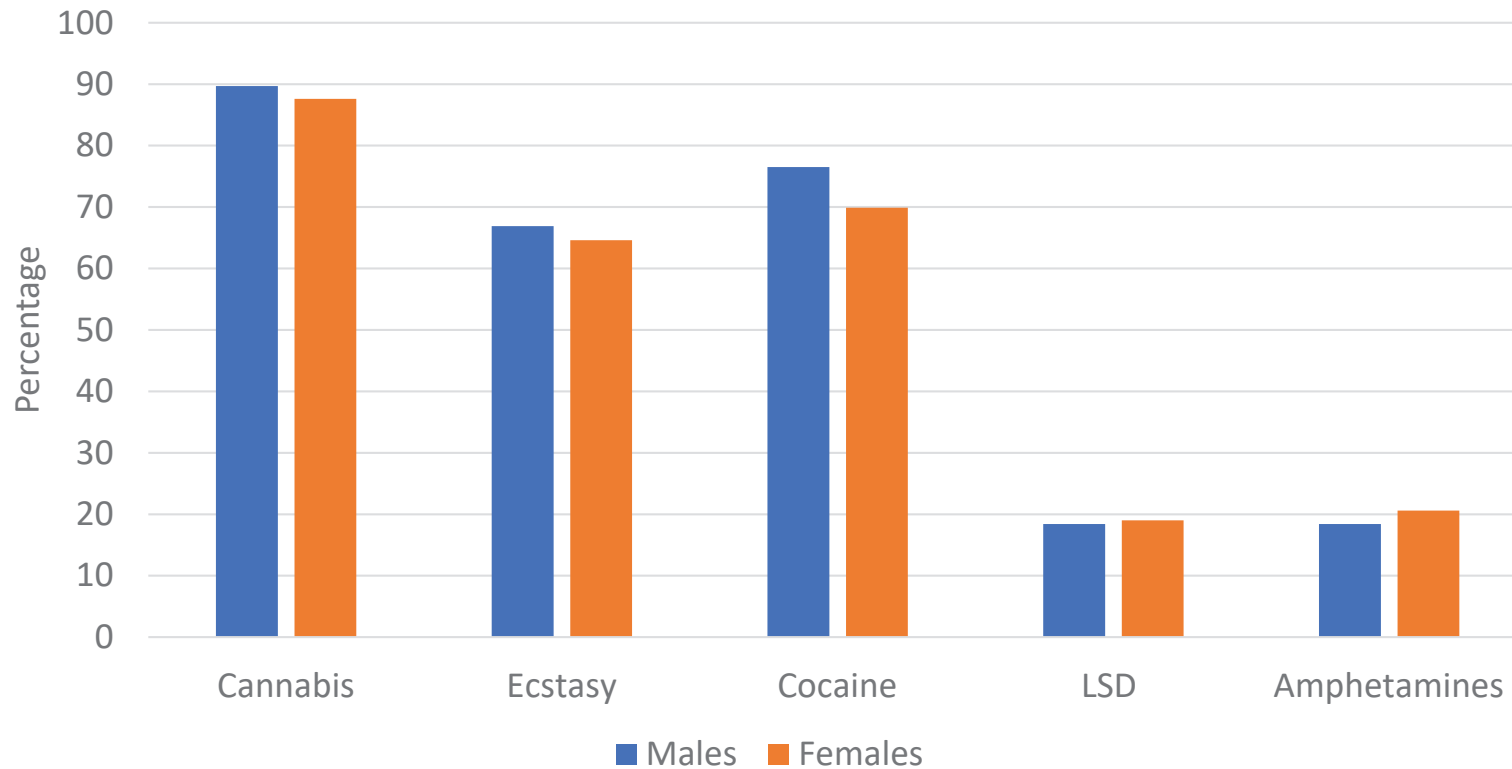


# Use of web surveys to capture trends in drug use

## Use of web surveys

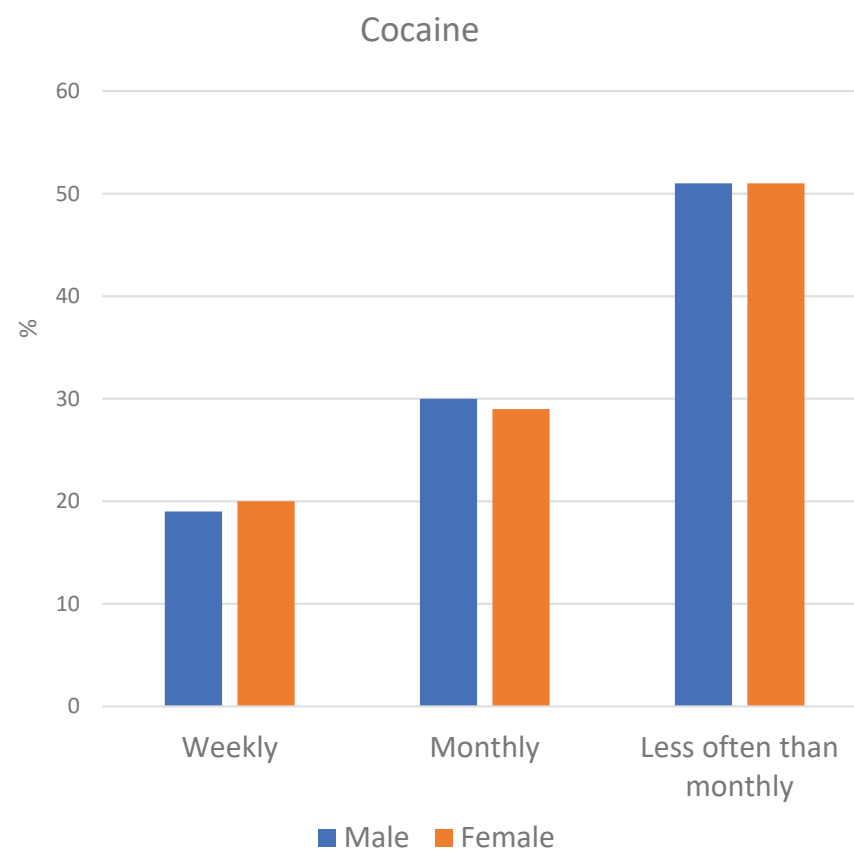
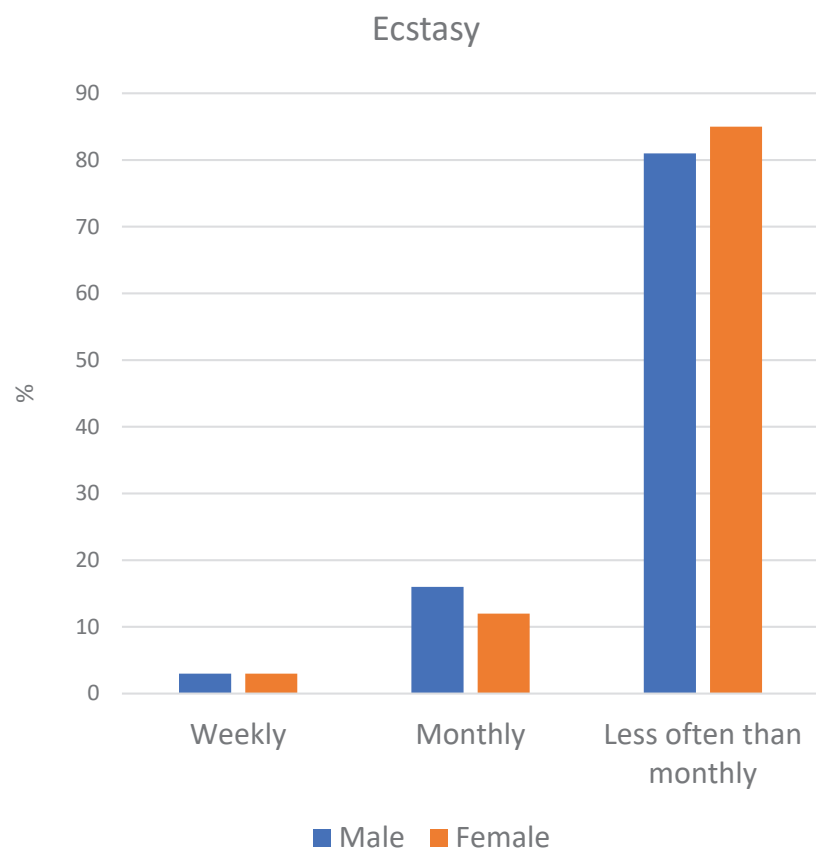
- Useful tool for collecting information on patterns of drug use
- In 2016 the EMCDDA started a pilot project — the European Web Survey on Drugs — to develop a system for collecting such data
- Ireland has participated in two web surveys – April 2020 & March-May 2021
- April 2020 – 662 participants (73% male; 27% female)

# Last year use of drugs, by drug type





# Frequency of stimulant use



# Conclusion

# Conclusion

- Number of people using illegal drugs is unchanged but people using wider range of drugs
- Increase in use of cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD, poppers
- Increase in stimulant use among 25-34 year old males and 15-24 year old females
- Important to supplement these results with data from web surveys among people who use drugs.

[hrb.ie](http://hrb.ie)

Find out more  
about our work



# Drug use and harm reduction practices among an Irish cohort of festival goers

**Prof Jo-Hanna Ivers**, Assistant Professor in Addiction  
Trinity College Dublin

**Nicki Killeen**, MA  
HSE National Social Inclusion Office



**Trinity College Dublin**  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

# Rationale



**Increased variety of  
drugs**

Q: What drugs  
are popular at  
festivals?



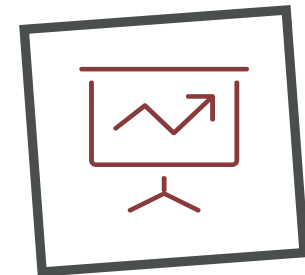
**Culture of intoxication**

Q: Who is using and  
how?



**Growing public health  
concern**

Q: Will people get  
medical help?



**Knowledge gaps**

Q: What is  
needed for  
research, policy  
and practice?

## Benefits

- Cheap and easy to apply
- Targeted recruitment
- Questions outside of standard structures

## Questions

- Extensive list of drugs
- Music preference
- Poly use
- Help seeking behaviours
- Sexual health
- Harm reduction
- Tourism

## Promotion

- Drugs.ie
- Four Four
- Boxed Off Festival

## Outcomes

- 1,193 respondents
- Most interest post-festival season



# Festival attendees



- Male (54%)
- Female (46.3%)
- Other (0.4%)



- Cited techno as preferred music genre (21.9%)



- Employed (52.5%)
- Third-level student (42.8%)
- Unemployed (2%)



- Had used drugs (94.2%)
- Poly use (86.8%)
- Average 3 substances at any one time
- 'CK'



- Average age 24 years old
- Dublin, Cork, Kildare, Galway



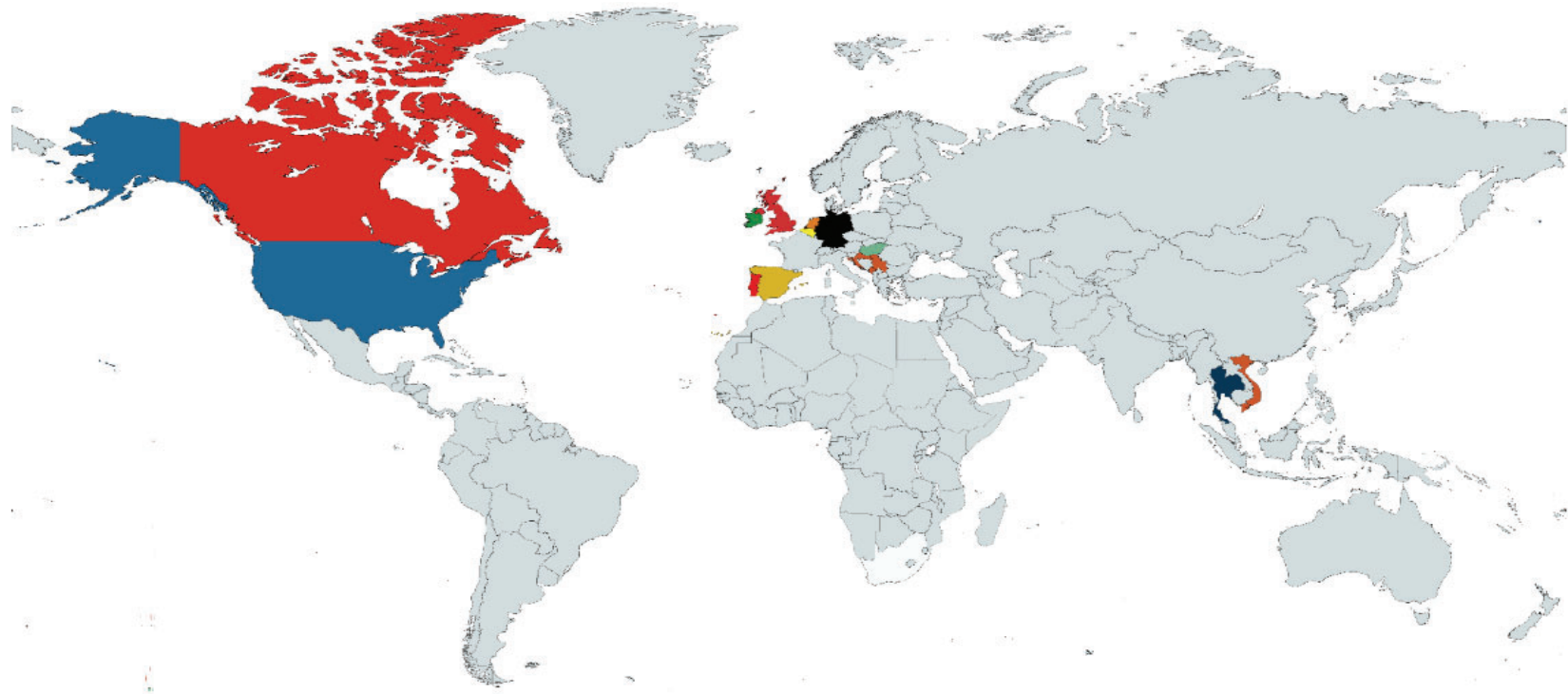
- Used at a festival abroad (53%)
- "Much stronger than at home"*



# Significance of festivals pre COVID-19



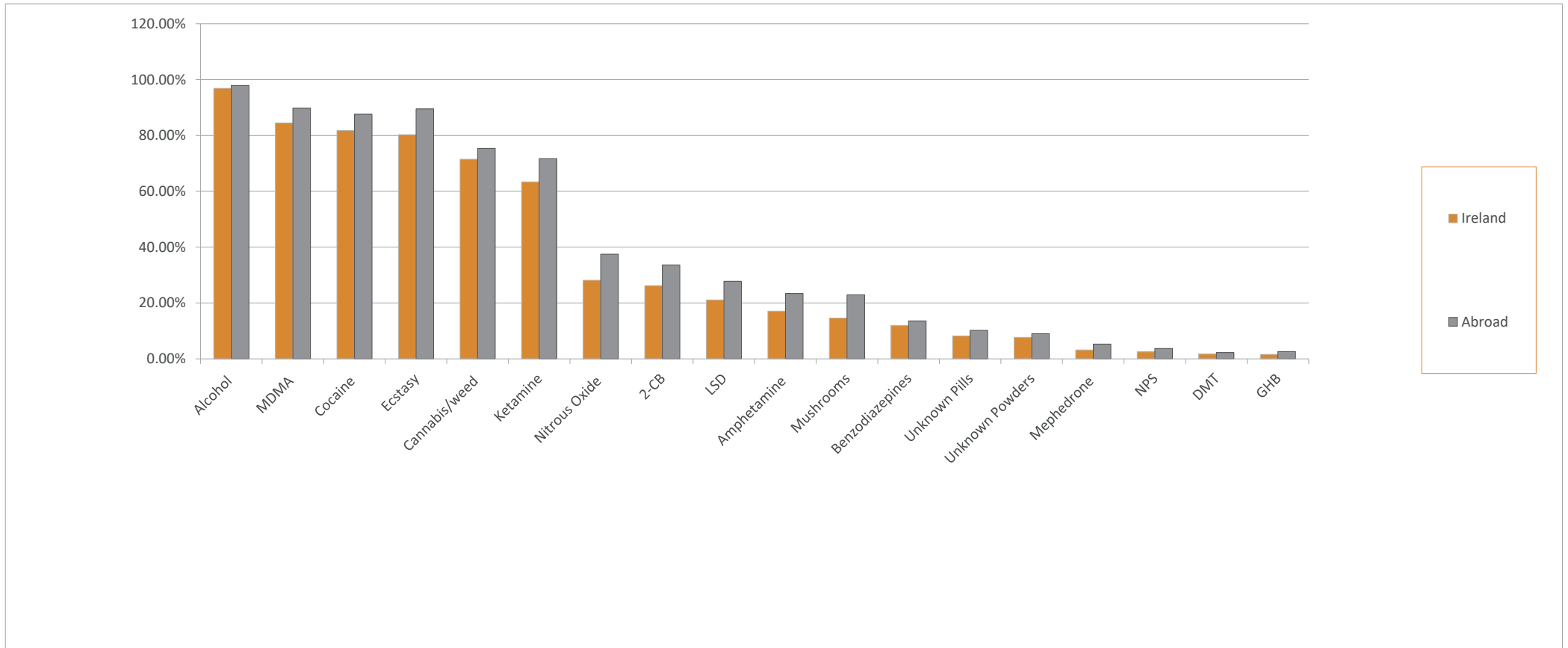
Number of festivals	2018 %	2018 Total	2019 %	2019 Total
1	24.9%	296	26.0%	309
2	28.3%	336	28.8%	342
3	24.7%	294	21.2%	252
4	10.8%	129	9.8%	116
5	4.3%	51	5.6%	66
5+	7.0%	83	8.7%	103
<b>Total</b>		<b>1,189</b>		<b>1,188</b>



**18 countries**

- Asia
- Europe
- North America

## Drug trends at festivals in Ireland and abroad



## Sourcing drugs for festivals

- **A known dealer** 73.3%
- **A friend** 55.1%
- **Unknown person/stranger** 33.4%
- **Online** 5.2%
- **Other** 2.2%



- Timing of purchase before event?
- Relationship with dealer?
- Friend technically supplier?
- Buying from a stranger – last resort?
- Role of social media and encrypted applications?
- Surface web or darknet – what drugs?

## Reducing harm



**88%**  
Sip water



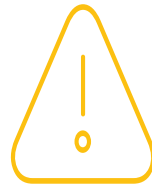
**48%**  
Test dose



**13% Other**



**76%**  
Leave time between  
doses



**18%**  
Single use

## Other measures considered as risk reduction strategies

### Peers

Experience and guidance

“Not using alone”

“Buddy systems”

Allocating a “sober friend”

“I only do it with friends who are experienced”

### Test kits and pill reports

Considered as research

Preparation

An attempt to reduce harms within current structures

### Health and recovery

Vitamin supplements

‘Serotonin recovery’

## Health and Wellbeing: Sexual Health

Had sex at a festival following drug use	n	%
Yes	477	39.98
No	716	60.02
Had unprotected sex		
No	262	21.96
Yes	316	26.49
Had unprotected sex and sought STI test		
No	1,148	96.23
Yes	45	3.77
Unprotected sex and sought information		
No	1,185	99.33
Yes	45	3.77
Had unprotected sex and sought morning after pill		
Yes	23	1.93
No	1,170	98.07

\*Consideration for sex / unprotected sex with partners

## Health and Wellbeing: Drug Emergencies



- 22% (n=263) reported becoming unwell at a festival after drug use
- Only **one in five** sought help (21%, n=54%)
- Only 16% (n=192) would seek medical help following drug use if needed in the future
- Future actions: ask participants to rate severity of how they felt/symptoms/drug emergency/overdose

**“too scared of what will happen to me if i go”**

**“First instinct would be to find a medical tent or ask someone to bring me. The quicker someone gets help the better”**

**“Unless very very unwell I don't think I would, too scared, anxious, scared of being judged, and or prosecuted somehow”**

**“many assume paramedics are going to immediately report drug use to the guards”**



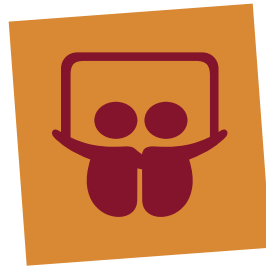
## Openness to health care interventions

People want help to protect their health



Drug Information at events

**85.08%**



*“Visibility, accessibility, reliability & confidentiality all very important”*



Free condoms at event

**79.30%**



*“A festival testing service is desperately needed to reduce harm”*

*“Having had friends die from drug use, I understand the risks that are involved. However, I also understand that drug use will continue, and drug testing at festivals and in Irish cities is guaranteed to save lives”*

## Drug checking settings



96%

Onsite services at a festival



70%

Community / fixed site



75%

Use of amnesty bin to inform an alert system



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## Lessons learned, gaps and next steps

- **Setting:** Focus on festival setting
- **Social excluded groups:** Use outside of the night-time economy
- **Females:** New profile of users
- **Contents:** Participants are unaware of the contents or substances actually taken
- **Changing drug market:** Experiences and influence on practices and health?
- **Poly use:** Rationale, dosing times, experiences
- **Safety:** People want to protect their health but approaches cited have limitations
- **Responses:** Fear of medical services but openness to utilise tailored services including drug checking or amnesty bins to inform public health alerts
- **Drug checking:** Harm cannot be reduced without market monitoring and analysis
- **Research and Evaluation**



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# NEXT STEPS

This report will, I hope, make an important contribution towards improvements in this area and will help inform new areas of work to reduce drug harms and protect the health of people who use drugs in Ireland.

Ireland will engage with EU counterparts re: issues on emerging drug trends.



THANK  
YOU





European Monitoring Centre  
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An Roinn Sláinte  
Department of Health