

HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline Report 2022

The HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline provides support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to drug and alcohol use. The service is free and can be contacted on Freephone 1800 459 459 or by emailing helpline@hse.ie.

The service deals with both helpline calls and emails so we use the term 'contacts' to refer to all calls and emails dealt with by the service, in this report. The Helpline dealt with 5412 contacts in 2022. This is an increase on 2021 (5268) and 2020 (5339). The charts below give a detailed breakdown of what substances were mentioned most in calls and emails in 2022, compared with previous years. All charts highlight how Alcohol remains our most referred to substance of concern, followed by Cocaine and then Cannabis. For the purpose of these charts, *Other Tablets* refers to Anti-depressants; Anti-psychotics; Z drugs and other prescribed medications (non-benzodiazepines). From *Chart 1*. below we can see that Alcohol contacts have continued to dominate and there was a 9% increase on 2021. Also the proportion of Cocaine contacts has increased by 17% and Cannabis contacts though still high have decreased by 8% on 2021. There were fewer Benzodiazepines calls/emails (11% less than in 2021) while the number of 'other tablets' remains the same. Heroin, Methadone and Codeine contacts have all decreased. Crack contacts average 56 per year and have been very similar in the last 4 years. There was an average of 53 contacts mentioning MDMA / Ecstasy in each of the last 4 years and the yearly figure has reduced by 47% since 2019. *Chart 1*. below shows 10 categories of drugs mentioned over the last 4 years while *Chart 2*. looks at the trends over the previous 10 years.

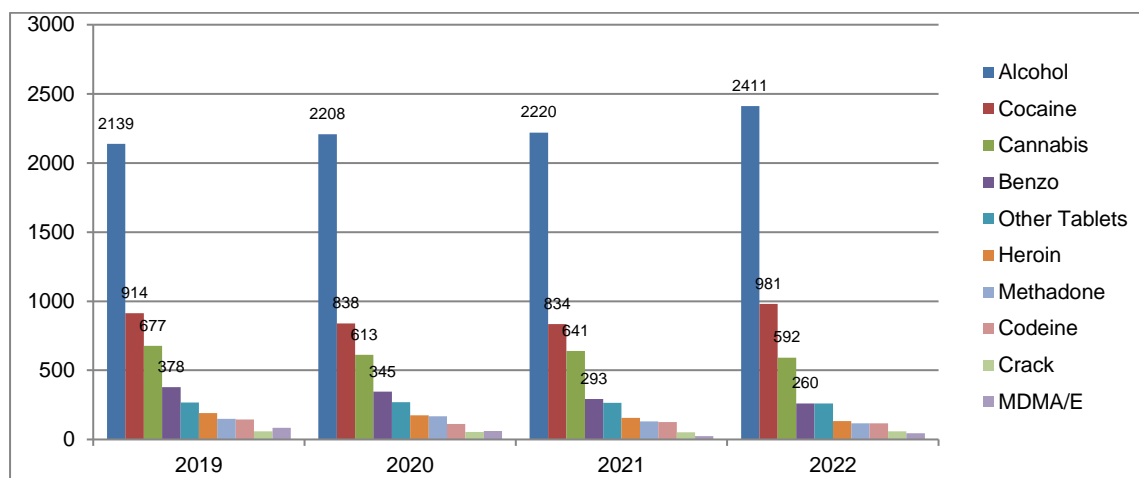


Chart 1. Drugs mentioned 2022 compared with 2021, 2020 and 2019

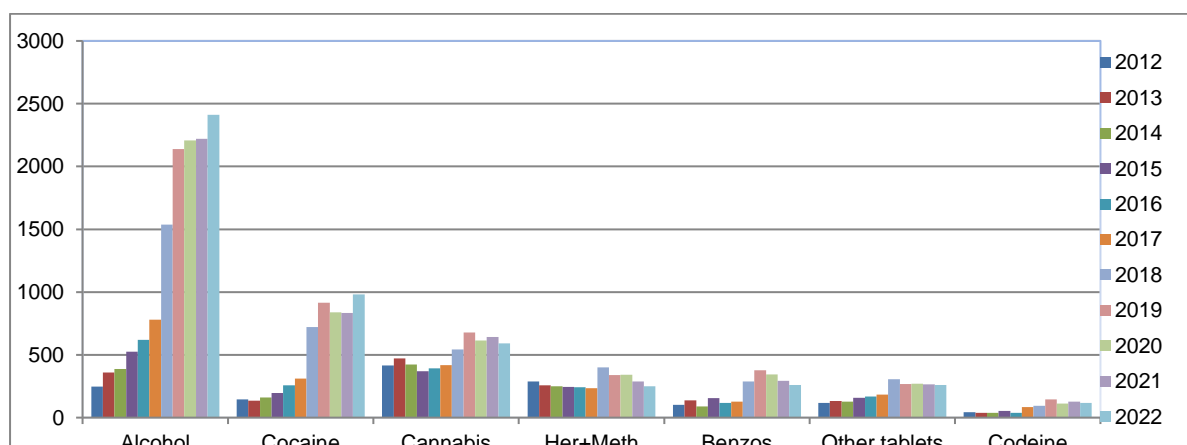


Chart 2. The most referred to substances in helpline contacts from 2012-2022

Alcohol

Alcohol contacts accounted for 50% of substance use related contacts in the last 3 years. *Table 1.* below outlines the quarterly figures since 2012.

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Q1	66	69	81	144	146	174	236	588	472	631	564
Q2	48	77	100	111	135	197	457	507	489	454	539
Q3	48	110	107	145	190	223	393	523	669	567	712
Q4	67	93	100	126	154	189	450	525	578	568	596
Total Alcohol	229	349	388	526	625	783	1536	2143	2208	2220	2411
% all contacts	9%	12%	15%	17%	23%	27%	36%	39%	41%	42%	45%
% addiction contacts	15%	21%	26%	28%	35%	38%	44%	47%	50%	50%	50%

Table 1. Quarterly alcohol contacts 2012- 2022

Looking further at the 2411 alcohol contacts that the service dealt with in 2022. We do not get detailed information on every call/ email but where the information was volunteered we know that 143(6%) of the alcohol contacts in 2022 were using cannabis along with alcohol and 67 (3%) were taking Anti-depressants as well as Alcohol. 408 (17%) of alcohol contacts were using Cocaine at the same time. This can be seen in *Chart 3.* below which shows that there has been an increase reports of combined alcohol and cocaine use since 2017.

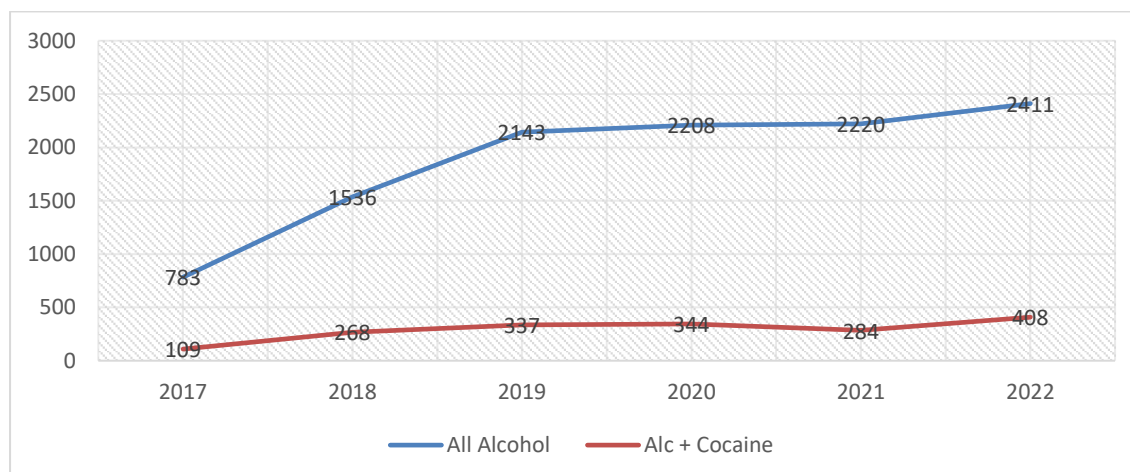


Chart 3. Combined Alcohol and Cocaine use as mentioned compared with All alcohol contacts per year 2017-2022

Themes and issues

We started to log themes and psychosocial impacts on our logging system, in the second half of 2020. Often a single call or email will cover more than one theme or issue. The vast majority of all drug/alcohol contacts with the Helpline are seeking help and support. The 'Themes and Topics' and 'Psychosocial Impacts' detailed below give some insight into what type of help our service users are seeking.

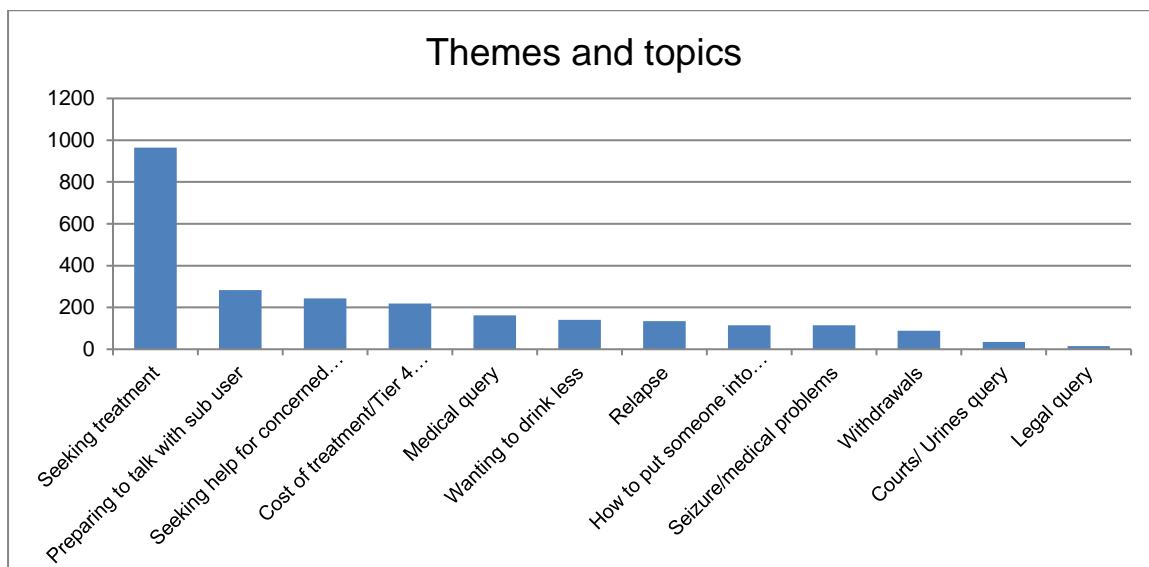


Chart 4. Main themes and topics to emerge in calls and emails 2022

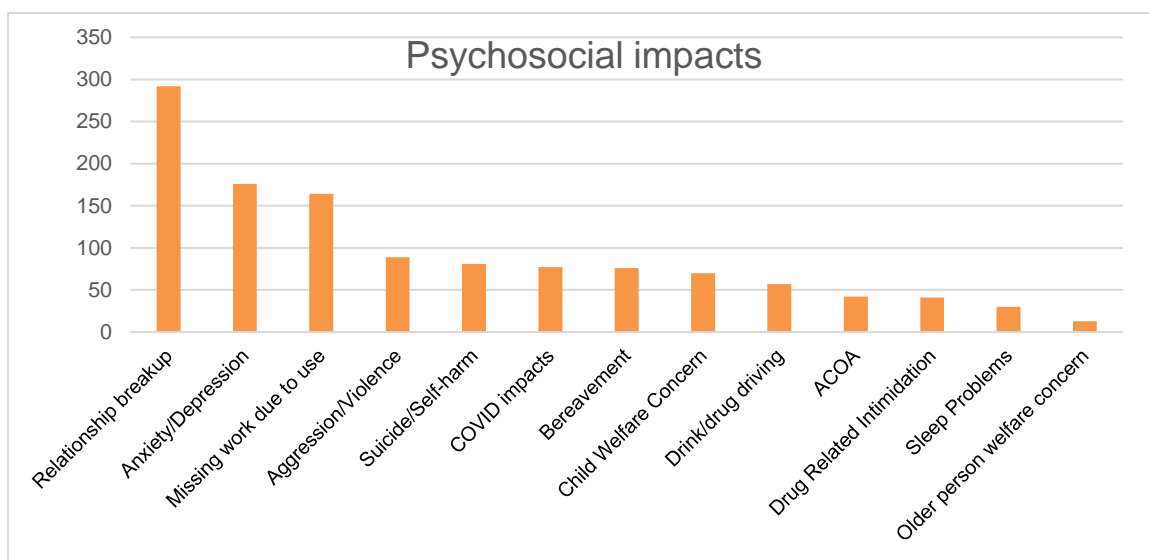


Chart 5. Psychosocial issues to emerge in calls and emails in 2022

Location

The Helpline deals with calls and emails from all over the country as well as getting a small amount of contacts from or about people from outside of the country; in prison or who are homeless or who say that they are in Dublin but do not specific what part. We have noted the stated location of 64% of substance use/addiction contacts in 2022. Health Atlas Ireland has figures for each CHO area based on 2016 census figures. They also give projections for 2022. These projections are less than the actual population figures that are available provisionally from the 2022 census but we have used those projections as the best current estimate available to calculate how many contacts per 100,000 of the population, we receive for each of the CHO areas.

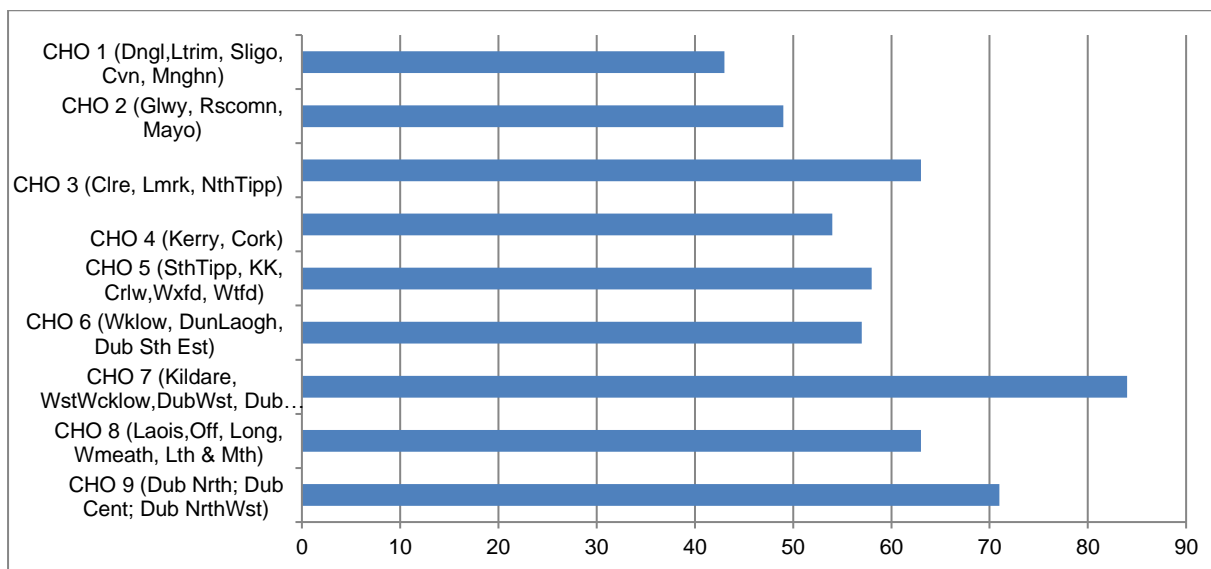


Chart 6. Location of contacts when revealed per 100,000 of population in 2022. (Using projected pop figures based on census 2016 taken from <https://finder.healthatlasireland.ie/>)

Young people

There were 338 contacts from or about a young persons' substance use in 2022. As you would expect contacts from the young people are different to contacts about young people by others (usually from a parent). There were 298, 3rd party contacts concerning a 0-20yr olds in 2022. In the same period there were 40, 16-20yr olds who got in touch about their own substance use. There were no contacts from 0-15yr olds on their own behalf. Eleven 16-20yr olds spoke to us about someone else's substance use, but they are not included in the table below which compares contact about young people with contacts from young people in 2022. Here we note that if a 3rd party (a parent, relative or teacher) is talking about a young persons drug use, its most likely to be about Cannabis (57%), followed by Cocaine (30%) and then Alcohol(19%). If we are talking with a young person directly, they are more likely to contact us about Alcohol (45%), then Cocaine (35%) and lastly Cannabis (27.5%). When talking about themselves the gender mix is almost 50:50 whereas when it's a 3rd party they are far more likely to be talking about a male (78%). When we look at topics mentioned in these calls we see that there's a similar percentage looking for treatment in both scenarios but we are hearing far more about harm reduction, impacts and psycho social issues when we hear directly from the young person.

	From a young person (16-20yr olds) N=40	About a young person (0-20yr olds) N=298
<i>Gender of the person of concern</i>		
Female	47.5%	22%
Male	50%	78%
<i>Drugs mentioned</i>		
Alcohol	45%	19%
Cocaine	35%	30%
Cannabis	27.5%	57%
<i>Topics/issues mentioned</i>		
Seeking treatment	17.5%	16%
Wanting to drink less	7.5%	0%
Withdrawals	2.5%	1%
Seizures/ Medical problems	5%	1%
Suicide/ Self-harm	5%	1%
Anxiety/Depression	7.5%	4%
Relationship breakdown	10%	6%

Table 2. Calls/emails about young people (0-20yrs) v from young people (16-20yrs) in 2022

Report compiled the Aileen Dooley, Helpline Manager from analysis of Drug and Alcohol data from helpline calls and emails. For further information contact helpline@hse.ie

Chart 7. below looks at the 4 top substances being discussed in calls and emails in 2022 and looks at the ages of those using those substances, when that information is available to us. This illustrates how some substances are more likely to be used by certain age groups i.e. at least 31% of all cannabis contacts were about people aged 20yrs or less but also that if you are aged 41yrs or over the problem is more likely to be alcohol.

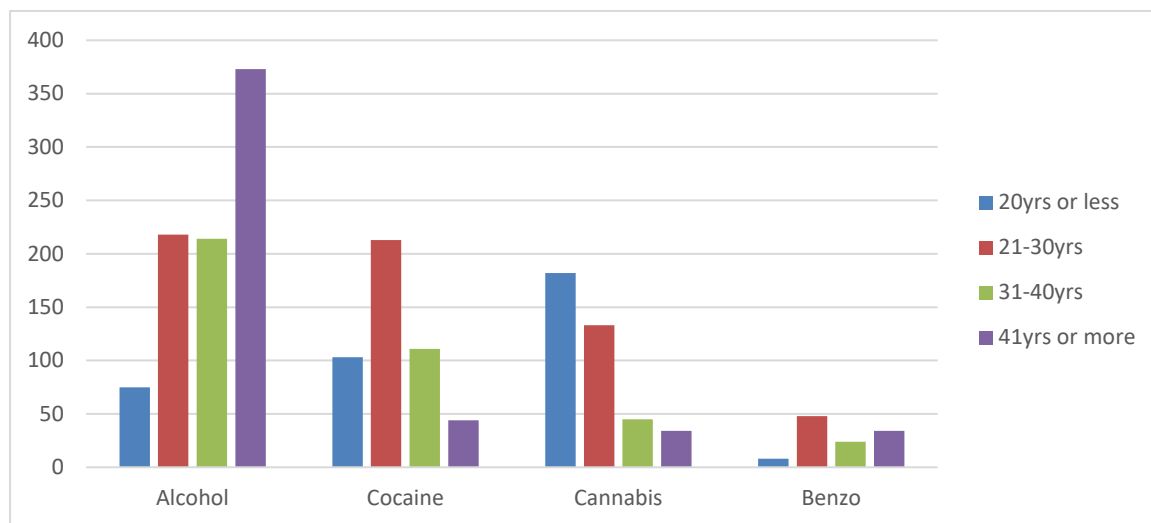


Chart 7. Age of substance user and drug being used (where information is available) in 2022

Chart 8. below shows the age breakdown of substance users in Helpline calls and emails in 2022. From this it can be seen that contacts with the Helpline are far more likely to be about male drug and alcohol users in all age brackets but particularly between the ages of 16 - 25years and to a lesser extent for 26 -45 year old males. Concerns about female drug and alcohol users fluctuate but peak between 16-25 years and rise again from those over 51years. Over 61yr old female drug or alcohol users are the only age group that have more calls/ emails than males of the same age. 70% of contacts about female substance users aged 51yrs+ were about Alcohol use. 87% of contacts about people aged 61 or over were with concerns about alcohol use. When theres a third party concern about the drug or alcohol use of a person aged 61 or over the gender mix is even, 51% about females over 61yrs and 49% about males over 61yrs. However when calling or emailing about themselves, there's a greater gender contrast with 68% from females and 31% from males (1% gender unknown).

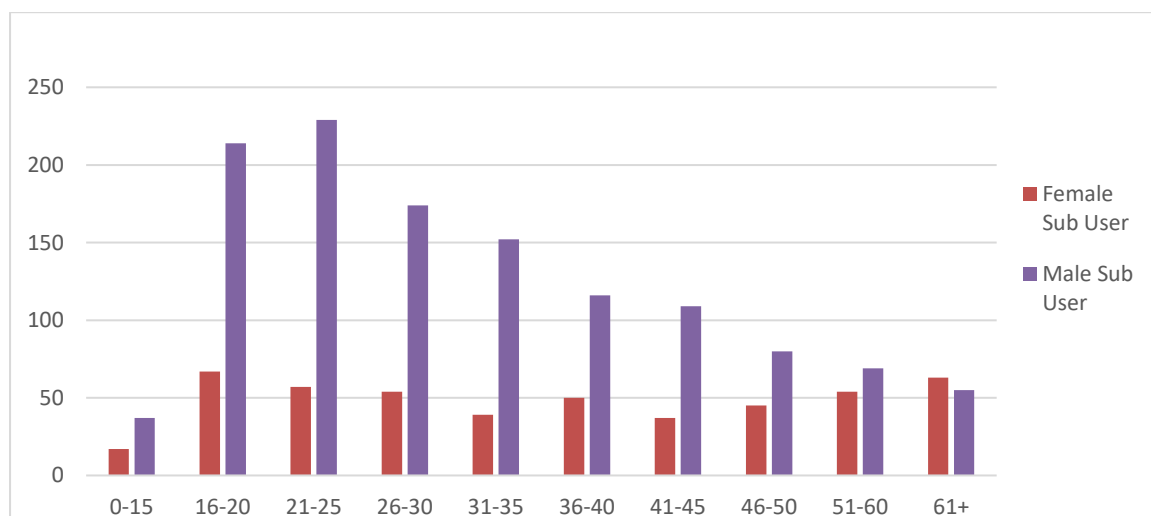
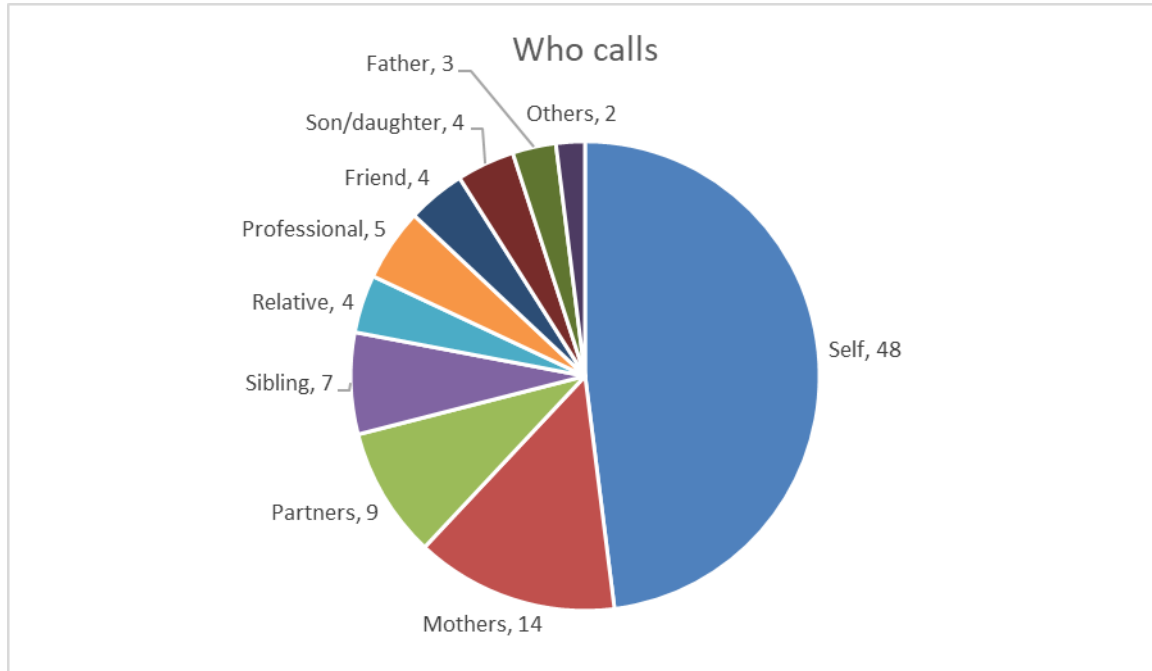


Chart 8. Number of drug and alcohol users referred to in calls and emails, by age and gender (when revealed) in 2022

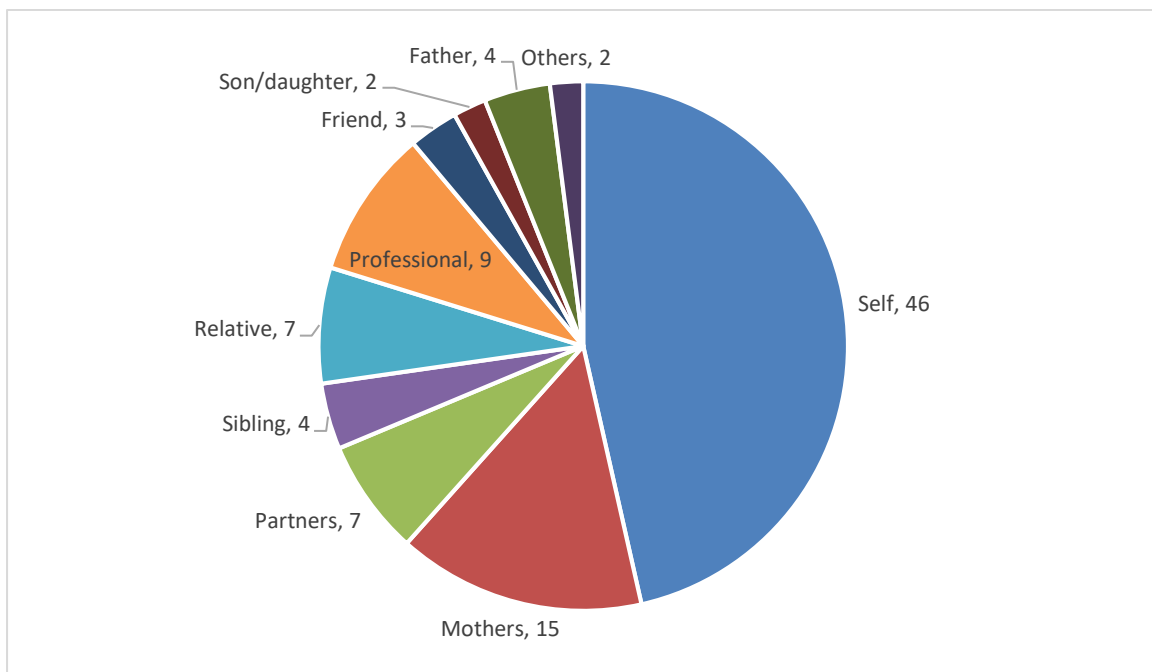
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Who makes contact?

We know the relationship to the person of concern in 82.5% of our contacts. Of these 49% of people were contacting us on behalf of themselves. The remaining contacts were from family, professionals and those doing research and are illustrated using Pie charts below. If we compare who made contact in 2022 with 5 years earlier in 2018 we can see that there is very little difference in the 5 years, of who is using our service.



Pie Chart 1. Who contacted the Helpline in 2022. (N=4467)



Pie Chart 2. Who contacted the Helpline in 2018 (N=3553)

Services used previously and signposted to

In 2022, 27% of contacts indicated that they had contact with services or supports prior to their contact with us. *Table 3.* below gives an outline of the breakdown of where these people had previously sought help. Some will have attended in months or years previous to their contact or some might be still linked in. 71% of people who contacted our service in 2022, were signposted to at least one service / support option during their call or email. Often multiple support options will be given to service users. This table shows the breakdown of what options were discussed with contacts in 2022. Noteworthy here is that 68% of people had contacted their GP about their substance use concern prior to contacting our service. This might point to a need for training for GPs in dealing with drug or alcohol concerns as expressed from patients. We have very little information on how people heard about our service but where referrals are mentioned, we know that 28% were referred to us by their GPs. We also note that 35% of people who contact our service are currently or were previously engaged with a counsellor.

2022	% Services used prior to Helpline contact (N=1461)	% Services signposted to by the Helpline (N=3827)
Peer support groups	14%	61%
Counsellor	35%	53%
Callback	-	46%
GP	68%	42%
Community Project	5%	30%
Internet based resources	-	24%
Day or residential treatment	16%	20%
Outreach /RIS Worker	1%	8%
STI/HIV Clinic	2%	3%
Online self-assessment tool	-	3%
JLO/ Garda	3%	1%

Table 3. Services use previously and services signposted to during calls/ emails in 2022

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The HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline provides free non-judgemental support, information, guidance and referral to anyone with a question or concern related to drug or alcohol use. We are contacted through Freephone 1800 459 459 or by email on helpline@hse.ie and are currently open Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5.30pm (closed bank holidays).

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