Factsheet: Young people, drugs and alcohol - the Irish situation 2026

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Glossary of terms

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) – defined according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) criteria. It is a maladaptive pattern of alcohol use leading to clinically significant impairment or distress, as manifested by 2 or more of the following 11 criteria occurring at any time in the last 12 months: role impairment; hazardous use; social problems; tolerance; withdrawal; longer or more use than intended; unsuccessful attempts to quit/cut down; much time spent using alcohol; reduced activities because of drinking; continued drinking despite psychological or physical problems; and alcohol cravings.

Drug prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a drug over a particular time period.

Heavy episodic drinking (HED) – sometimes referred to as 'binge drinking' and defined as consuming six or more standard drinks on a single occasion. This is approximately equivalent to three pints of beer or cider, six pub measures of spirits, or just under one bottle of wine.

Last month prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. A proportion of those reporting current use may be occasional (or first-time) users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey. It should therefore be noted that current use is not synonymous with regular use.

Last year prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported using a named drug in the year prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

Lifetime prevalence – refers to the proportion of the sample that reported ever having used the named drug at the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have necessarily used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

Introduction

This factsheet includes key Irish research on young people up to the age of 24 and will be updated as new data is published. The studies cited may report on different age groups and these are noted in the text.

Key research on drug use in young people in Ireland

There are numerous studies that include information on drug use in young people; for prevalence data we have chosen the four sources below.

HBSC - Health Behaviour in School age Children[1]

In 2022, Ireland participated for the seventh time in the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children[1] HBSC study. The survey included 9,071 school-children from 9 to 18 years old; 191 primary and post-primary schools across Ireland participated. Among other health indicators, data were collected on smoking and the use of alcoholconsumption and drunkeness and cannabis.

ESPAD - European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs[2]

The eight European Schools Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs ESPAD survey was undertaken in 37 European countries during 2024 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 113, 882 students aged 15-16-years-old. In Ireland the final sample included 1,880 students born in 2008.[2]

Planet Youth Ireland[3,4]

Planet Youth Ireland is an initiative designed to promote wellbeing and improve outcomes for our young population. Five regions regularly conduct a detailed standardised survey, adapted to the Irish context, with adolescents (post-Junior Cert) in over 150 schools and Youthreach centres across Ireland (>15,000 adolescents).

GUI - Growing up in Ireland study[5,6]

Growing Up in Ireland is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland.[5] The study follows the progress of two cohorts: Cohort '98 (the 'Child Cohort') who were aged 9 years at first interview in 2007 and Cohort '08 (the Infant Cohort) who were just 9 months in the first wave in 2008.

Most recently, Growing up in Ireland has presented summary information on the lives and circumstances of the 20-year-olds from the fourth wave of 5,191 interviews with the Child Cohort '98 between August 2018 and June 2019.[6]

HI - Healthy Ireland survey[7,8]

The Healthy Ireland survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours. It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 15 years and over. For the 202 survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2022 and April 2023. 6,407 out of the total 7,411 survey respondents agreed to participate in the module on drug use providing a participation rate of 86% of survey respondents.[7] For the 2025 Survey, 7,556 people, aged 15 and older and living in Ireland were interviewed via phone, between October 2024 and April 2025.[8]

All illicit drugs

A number of these surveys ask young people about their use of illicit drugs. Table 1 provides trends in drug use by young people in the 2023 Healthy Ireland survey.[7] Those aged 15-24 (20%) are most likely to report last year drug use. Men aged 15-24 (23%) report the highest level of last year drug use, compared to 16% of women in the same age group.

Table 1 Prevalence of illicit drug use by 15-24-year-olds (%) Healthy Ireland, 2023

	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
Any illicit drug	29.0	20.8	9.2
Cannabis	26.5	18.5	8.2
Ecstasy	9.0	4.9	1.5
Cocaine	6.8	2.2	1.0
Magic mushrooms	4.0	1.7	0.0
LSD	2.6	1.0	0.0
Ketamine	4.4	1.6	0.5
Amphetamines	1.9	1.2	0.8
NPS	0.9	0.5	0.0
Sedatives or tranquilisers	8.0	6.1	2.7
Alcohol	83.1	77.1	64.6
Tobacco	33.0	26.1	20.3

Table 2 provides trends in drug use by 15-16-years-old in the 2024 ESPAD survey.[2]

Table 2 Prevalence of alcohol, tobacco and drug use by 15-16-years-old (%) ESPAD, 2024

	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
Cannabis	11.8	10.2	4.9
Ecstasy	1.6	1.2	~
Cocaine	2.0	1.3	~
Crack	1.1	0.8	~
LSD/ hallucinogens	1.6	~	~
Amphetamines	0.8	0.7	~
Metamphetamine	0.7	0.6	~
Heroin	0.7	0.6	~
NPS	2.2	1.5	~
Sedatives/tranquilisers without prescription	2.9	~	~
Painkillers to get high	3.9	~	~
Anabolic steroids	1.2	~	~
Inhalants	6.3	4.8	2.5
GHB	0.6	~	~
Alcohol	66.6	59.9	35.1
Tobacco	23.7	~	2.1
e-cigarettes	25.0%	~	~

~not reported on the ESPAD data portal

For further information go to the ESPAD data portal where you can search by drug and filter by Ireland.

The most recent Planet Youth Ireland reports from the West (Galway city, Galway, Mayo and Roscommon counties) show:[3]

- Parental tolerance of teenage drunkenness has shown a notable change over the period of the four Planet Youth surveys. Wherever parental tolerance is high, the teenagers are drinking more, both at home and in the pub. Teenagers whose parents are more tolerant of drunkenness are four times more likely to get drunk.
- One of the most common places for teenagers to get drunk is at a friend's house, often enabled by a parent or carer. Use of alcohol at a young age can impair brain development and will increase the likelihood of developing a dependency later in life. Those in parental roles can make a significant difference to the long-term health and wellbeing of our children by agreeing not to supply alcohol to teenagers in our homes.
- The daily use of vaping products is at high levels and nicotine pouch use has become a concern also. Nicotine is a substance that is highly addictive, and these products are not suitable for teenagers.
- Parental engagement is a protective factor for substance use behaviour. Those pupils that report higher rates of parental supervision are less likely to engage in substance use behaviour.
- Unsupervised leisure time correlates with higher levels of substance use. Teenagers that report hanging out in the streets regularly are nine times more likely to use cannabis and teens that spend unsupervised time at a friend's home are five times more likely to get drunk.
- Being outside after midnight is also a risk factor for substance use behaviour. Teenagers that report being outside after midnight in the last week are two and a half times as likely to get drunk.
- It is important that teenagers have access to a range of quality supervised, structured activities as they get older. Participation in supervised activities is a protective factor for substance use and promotes physical and mental wellbeing.

The most recent Planet Youth Ireland report from Tipperary contains data from each county of secondary school students aged 15-16 since 2023 to maximise comparability (Table 3).[4]

Table 3 Prevalence of substance use among secondary school students aged 15-16

Region & year of survey	Lifetime alcohol	Lifetime vaping	Lifetime smoking	Lifetime cannabis
Tipperary 2024	77%	44%	23%	7%
Wicklow 2024	70%	38%	21%	13%
Galway City 2024	69%	43%	25%	14%
Galway County 2024	74%	46%	27%	11%
Mayo 2024	71%	44%	28%	11%
Roscommon 2024	78%	44%	26%	10%
North Dublin 2023	66%	39%	19%	17%
Cavan 2023	76%	47%	28%	9%
Monaghan 2023	76%	40%	23%	9%
National Average	73%	43%	24%	11%

Cannabis

How many young people use cannabis in the Republic of Ireland?

The 2023 Healthy Ireland survey involved 6,407 people in Ireland.[7] The results for those aged 15-24 showed that:

- Those aged 15–24 years were most likely to report recent (last year) cannabis use (18.5%).
- 31% of those aged 15-24 have ever used cannabis (lifetime use).
- Cannabis use in the last month is most common among those aged 15-24 (8%).

In the 2022 HBSC study, based on children aged 9 to 18, 6% of boys and 6% of girls report cannabis use in the last 12 months. Older children are more likely to report cannabis use in the last 12 months than younger children.[1]

The 2024 ESPAD study[2] of 15-16-year-old students also asked how many times in their lives they had used cannabis. The study found that:

- 88.2% of students reported never using cannabis
- 11.8% of students in Ireland used cannabis in their lifetime, compared to 11.3% all ESPAD countries.
- More male (12.1%) than female respondents (11.3%) have ever tried cannabis (lifetime use).
- 10.2% of students had used cannabis in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 4.9% had used cannabis in the last 30 days (current use).
- Age 14 years was the most frequently reported starting age for using cannabis (4.4%). Females were more likely to start using it at 14 years of age (5.2%), males at 15 (4.8%).
- 28.5% perceived that it would be fairly or very easy to get cannabis if they wanted it.
- 22.5% saw no risk in trying cannabis once or twice, 33.7% perceived slight risk, 19.5% moderate risk, and 16.1% great risk.
- 4.9% had smoked cannabis before midday and 4.5% had smoked it alone. Students reported experiencing problems due to cannabis use, namely memory problems (5%) and other problems such as arguments, fights, accidents, and poor school results (2.8%).
- Among those who said that they used cannabis 37.6% of students were classified as high-risk cannabis users. Female students who used cannabis were more likely than male students to be classified as high-risk users (36.8% vs 35.6%).

For further information go to the ESPAD data portal where you can search for “cannabis” and filter by Ireland.

In the latest Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, (70%) of 17/18-year-olds reported that they had never used cannabis.[5] Nearly one-third (30%) of the 17/18-year-olds reported having tried cannabis, with between 2% and 4% having tried each of ecstasy, cocaine, painkillers and aerosols/glue. Almost 10% stated that they currently smoked cannabis occasionally or more than once per week.

The GUI study [6] presents findings on the lives of 20-year-olds, and shows:

- 59% of all 20-year-olds reported that they had 'ever tried cannabis'
- 26% said they had tried cannabis once or twice
- 18% said that they took it occasionally
- 6% took it more than once a week
- 9% don't take cannabis anymore
- 13% reported that they had tried 'ecstasy, cocaine etc.' less than 5 times
- 9% of all young adults had used 'prescription drugs for "recreational" use.

Alcohol

Alcohol use by young people

In the most recent ESPAD survey[2]

- 33.5% reported never drinking alcohol
- 66.5% of respondents had tried alcohol and 35.1% were current users (had used alcohol in the previous 30 days).
- Male students (66.1%) were more likely than females (67%) to have used alcohol in their lifetime.
- 72.3% of students had never been drunk, while 27.7% had.
- Almost a quarter of students (23.2%) had engaged in heavy episodic (binge) drinking in the last 30 days.
- Age 15 years was the most frequently reported starting age of drinking alcohol 20.8%.
- Of the choices given, the most common source for getting alcohol was from parents 23.2%.
- 8.1% perceived no risk in consuming 1-2 drinks nearly every day, whereas 27.5% perceived great risk.
- Students were more likely to report that they use alcohol 'mostly' or 'always' for the purpose of enjoyment ('because it's fun' (21.7%)).
- Students who reported all of their friends use alcohol were more likely to have tried it (93.7%) compared to those who reported none of their friends use it (35.9%).

In the 2024 HBSC study 19% of children report that they have had an alcoholic drink in the last 30 days (19% in 2018). Girls and older children are more likely to report that they have had an alcoholic drink in the last 30 days.[1]

Overall, 18% of children report ever having been 'really drunk' (19% in 2018). Girls and older children are more likely to report ever having been 'really drunk'.[1]

The 2025 Healthy Ireland survey took place between October 2024 and April 2025 with 7,556 people, aged 15 and older and living in Ireland were interviewed via phone,.[7] The results for Ireland showed that 75% of 15–24-year-olds reported alcohol use in the previous 12 months**.**

Men are more likely than women to binge drink (40% and 12% respectively), with younger people more likely to do so than older people (15-24 year olds: 36%, 75+ year olds: 7%).[7]

Data from the GUI the lives of 20-year-old,[8] shows the vast majority of young adults (96%) had consumed alcohol by the age of 20, increasing from 90 per cent at age 17/18. The average age for having their first full alcoholic drink was 16. Amongst those 20-year-olds who had ever drank alcohol, 22 per cent drank monthly, 49 per cent drank two to four times per month, 22 per cent drank two to three times per week, 3 per cent drank 4+ times per week and just 3 per cent never drank.

How many young people receive treatment for alcohol and drug use?

The data are drawn from the National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) which is the national database that records and reports on treated problem alcohol and drug use in Ireland. Treatment is provided by statutory and non-statutory services, including residential centres, community-based addiction services, general practices, and prison services. The dataset contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include service users in continuous care. As there is currently no national system-wide unique identifier in the Irish health system, the NDTRS records cases of treatment. In any given year, individuals may appear more than once if treated in different centres or if they return to treatment in the same centre. When someone in treatment has been using multiple drugs, one is identified as their 'main problem' drug.

Unpublished data from the NDTRS shows that in 2025, 75 (0.8%) cases aged under 18 were in treatment for alcohol as a main problem drug. This has decreased from 112 (1.5%) in 2017.

75 cases entered alcohol treatment under the age of 18 in 2025.

Of these:

- 35 (46.7%) were male.
- 19 (25.3%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 40 (53.3%) use more than one drug (polydrug use)
- 59 (78.7%) were new cases and 15 (20.0%) were previously treated.

416 cases entered alcohol treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2025.

Of these:

- 256 (61.5%) were male.
- 227 (54.6%) use more than one drug.
- 241 (57.9%) were new cases and 160 (38.5%) were previously treated.

531 cases entered drug treatment under the age of 18 in 2025.

Of these:

- The majority, 380 (71.6%), were in treatment for cannabis as their main problem drug.

- 405 (76.3%) were male.
- 126 (23.7%) were referred to treatment by social services.
- 290 (54.6%) use more than one drug (polydrug use).
- 400 (75.3%) were new cases.

1,964 cases entered drug treatment aged 18 to 24 in 2025.

Of these:

- The majority, 905 (46.1%), were in treatment for cocaine as their main problem drug.
- 1,465 (74.6%) were male.
- 1,225 (62.4%) use more than one drug.
- 1,035 (52.7%) were new cases and 831 (42.3%) were previously treated.

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status, treatment status, frequency of use) up to 2025 see library interactive tables]

How many young people die from using alcohol and drugs?

The National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. Table 6 shows unpublished NDRDI data for 2021 and 2022.

Table 4 Number of drug poisoning deaths among persons aged 24 years or under, by sex, NDRDI 2022*

Poisoning	Male	Female
2022	8	~
2021	15	~

*Excludes deaths due to alcohol poisoning only (i.e. without any other drug implicated)
~Less than five deaths.

What does the law say about underage drinking?

Intoxicating Liquor Acts

- It is an offence to sell alcohol to anyone under the age of 18.
- It is an offence to buy alcohol for people under the age of 18.
- It is also an offence to give alcohol to anyone under the age of 18 unless in a domestic home and they have parental consent.

See more at Citizens Information

The Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 aims to reduce alcohol consumption in Ireland to 9.1 litres per person per annum by 2020 and to reduce the harms associated with alcohol. The Act consists of 29 sections and includes five main provisions. These are: minimum unit pricing; health labelling of alcohol products; the regulation of advertising and sponsorship of alcohol products; structural separation of alcohol products in mixed trading outlets; and the regulation of the sale and supply of alcohol in certain circumstances.

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