

**SECOND INTERIM REPORT ON RESEARCH INTO THE
EXTENT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN THE
WESTERN HEALTH BOARD AREA IN
CHILDREN UP TO 18 YEARS OLD**

INTRODUCTION

At the date of writing this report, I have interviewed most of the key personnel who either work with the youth, or whose work involves preventing illicit drug use in the Western Health Board area. I have also completed the pilot test of schools, and am currently awaiting the results of this analysis.

The information in the following interviews, and in the interviews detailed in the first interim report was given to me by a variety of sources including youth workers, Gardai, Juvenile Liaison Officers, Probation Officers, Social Workers, Health Board alcohol and addiction counsellors, psychiatrists, local priests and local residents. As these people are those who are most closely involved on a day-to-day basis with the youth and their problems, or with problem substance use, I feel that the information is reasonably accurate. The information given is the honest opinions and beliefs of these people. It is however impossible to accurately estimate the extent of substance use among this age group, or to pin-point the areas where these behaviours occur. I am confident however that this information together with the results of the survey in schools and training centres for early school leavers will give the best possible overview of the situation.

Areas which are mentioned in this report, are done so as being areas which have been identified by various sources as having teenage substance misuse, but it should also be noted that these very areas are those which have the highest concentration of teenagers resident within them.

INTERVIEWS WITH KEY PERSONNEL IN GALWAY CITY CONTINUED

1. Westside

Further interviews with key personnel in the Westside area again confirm that a large percentage of children under 18 years of age in the area have access to alcohol. Various reports put the percentage involved as ranging from just involving about fifteen 13 - 14 year old children who drink cans of beer and cider, to 50 % of the teenagers, to as high an estimate as 90 %. Children in the area may start drinking as young as 10 - 11 years old, with perhaps more boys than girls involved. The older teenagers tend to go drinking in the town.

Cannabis availability to teenagers in the area was again reported, but further interviews from the area from different sources, including youth workers and gardai seem to indicate that petrol sniffing may have decreased among children in the area in recent years.

2. **Rahoon**

Rahoon is included as part of the Westside area, but information pertaining only to this area was obtained from a youth worker which I felt would be more appropriate to place apart from Westside. This youth worker who used to work in an area of Dublin with severe drug problems, has spent a number of years based in Rahoon. By comparison with Dublin, Rahoon would not have a drug problem, but the use of drugs is slowly increasing. The youth worker felt that now is the ideal time to intervene before drug use gains a foothold. Associated signs and symptoms of drug use e.g. vandalism, petty crime, joy-riding and graffiti are now widespread, where they did not exist 4 years ago. It is estimated that 1 out of every 3 teenagers in the area drinks alcohol frequently and that about 1 in 6 would use cannabis and “tabs” e.g. LSD or whatever they can obtain. Heroin is not reported in the area.

3. **Knocknacarra**

Further interviews from key personnel in the Knocknacarra area again suggest that alcohol is the main substance used by teenagers. The extent of underage drinking is not known but some feel that it is confined to a “hard-core” group of 14-16 year olds who have the money to buy alcohol in off-licences.

Cannabis is also felt to be available to the youth in the area, but ecstasy tablets may not be as widespread as some reports indicated.

4. **Ballinfoile**

Ballinfoile is a relatively new estate with one section being about 10 years old and the other section about 7 years old. The children in the older section tend to be slightly older than the others about 10 to 12 years old. There are nearly 600 children in the area and as stated most of them are under 12 years old. Substance use among teenagers is therefore not a major problem in the area yet. However the same conditions which are believed to have been influential in other areas of Galway city developing substance use among teenagers exist here, that is large housing estates with no ancillary services provided to cater for the numbers of youth in the area. A youth worker has however been recently employed in the area.

Underage drinking occurs occasionally among some of the older teenagers, who have cider parties etc. Cannabis is believed to be available but use is not reported to be widespread among the youth.

5. **Other areas in Galway city**

Various reports on the other areas of Galway city such as Shantalla and Mervue again suggest that alcohol use in the under 18 year old age group is quite prevalent with an estimate of about 50 % of this age group having access to alcohol, by buying it in off-licences, pubs and super-markets.

Cannabis is said to be available throughout Galway city and is thought to be used by the youth and by older people. LSD, “speed” and perhaps ecstasy tablets are

thought to be mainly used by third level students. Heroin by all reports is not known to be available in Galway city, prevented gaining a foot-hold perhaps by local drug-dealers.

6. Travellers

Information was obtained from youth workers and social workers who work with the travelling families. There are about 170 travelling families in Galway city. Children especially the boys tend to follow their parents drinking patterns. A high percentage of travellers, about 40 % are abstainers, more than 50 % drink heavily during special events but then would not drink for several months. A small percentage are chronic heavy problem drinkers. These families come to the attention of the professionals through social problems. Boys have more freedom and therefore have more of an opportunity to drink alcohol. Girls are expected to follow a high moral standard and usually do not drink prior to marriage.

Volatile substance abuse was a larger problem among the travelling youth but has decreased in prevalence in the past few years. Some cannabis use is reported among the travellers. They would seem to have their own source.

7. Other Services

a. Juvenile Liaison Service

Juvenile Liaison Officers in Galway city report very small numbers of under 18 year olds in contact with their service who were referred for drug problems. The numbers who are referred for underage drinking is a small but rising percentage of their case-load. The increase in alcohol related cases is due to increased resources made available to the J.L.O.s to identify and prevent underage drinking and not to an actual increase in the numbers that are drinking. The Gardai have in recent years made increased efforts to prevent underage drinking,

b. Probation Service

The Probation Service deals mainly with the 16 - 25 year old age group. About 60 % of their cases are aged under 19 years old. Alcohol would be a causal factor in referral to the Probation Service in about 20 % of cases, and drugs in about 6 - 8 %. These problems with substance use often present after referral to the service and are not necessarily the reason for referral.

Alcohol is identified as being the main substance misused. As regards illicit drugs, cannabis is the main drug used, with some ecstasy, LSD and "speed".

c. Social Work Department

Problems with underage drinking and illicit drug use are enmeshed with multiple family disharmony problems, and are not isolated but are managed in the overall treatment of the family. Social workers would identify lack of community

development and poor parenting skills which lead to poor communication skills as being a factor in problem substance use among teenagers. "At risk" areas in Galway city for various problems seem to rotate as each "at risk" area develops problems, comes to a crisis and then sorts through the problems. E.g. Mervue and Bohermore are now settled areas, Westside is currently working through its problems, Castlepark estate in Ballybane is now one of the areas most in need of services and community development, and Ballinfolle may well be the future problem area.

d. Psychiatric and Alcohol Counselling Services

Both of these services have had quite small numbers of under 18 year olds referred to their services in Galway city for either alcohol or drug related problems.

COUNTY GALWAY OUTSIDE GALWAY CITY

The information gathered on the rest of Co. Galway is not as detailed as that obtained for Galway city. This is due to the fact that there are fewer youth workers employed throughout the county and they therefore cover much larger geographical areas.

1. The Gaeltacht area of Connemara

There are reports of underage drinking in this area. The actual extent of this is not known but it is thought that girls would drink to the same or even a larger extent than the boys. It is thought that problem drinking per se may not start until the teenagers are 18 years old as it is only at this age that they have the money to buy the alcohol. However poitin is available at very cheap rates from sheebens at about £2 a bottle. Drug use among teenagers is not known to occur in the area.

2. The Galltacht area of Connemara

Underage drinking is again found in this area, again the actual extent of it is not fully known. There are reports of cannabis being available in Clifden and a few teenagers under 18 years old have been found in possession of cannabis for personal use in the area in the past year.

3. Ballinasloe

From different accounts Ballinasloe is reported to have both underage drinking and illicit drug use. The reported extent of these behaviours varies. Children under 18 years are reported to have access to alcohol in certain pubs in the town, where they are served. Some youth workers would report that underage drinking is quite prevalent even more so than in Galway city. The Juvenile Liaison Service on the other hand feel that while underage drinking does occur in Ballinasloe as in any other town in Co. Galway, it does not occur to such an extent that it would be considered a problem. Only 1 % of the case load of the J.L.O.s would be directly related to alcohol, while about 3 % of the case load would indirectly involve alcohol.

About half of the 20 youth who attend the “young offender’s” workshop in Ballinasloe are there for either alcohol or drug related problems.

The alcohol and addiction counselling service in Ballinasloe treats alcohol and drug problems in those under 18 years old. There are currently two 17 year olds attending the centre for alcohol problems. In the past year the service has counselled 11 males and 8 females with drug problems under the age of 20 years old. While all of them are over 18 years old they all started to use drugs when they were under 18 years old. The service covers all of east Galway and not just Ballinasloe .

The Juvenile Liaison service has dealt with two cases of possession of cannabis in under 18 year olds in the past year in Ballinasloe. The Probation Service which covers east Galway have had two young people under 18 years old from the area recently involved with their service for alcohol abuse problems, one for a combination of alcohol and drug problems, and none for drug use on its own.

Illicit drugs reported to be available in Ballinasloe include cannabis, ecstasy, LSD, “speed”, magic mushrooms, and benzodiazepines e.g. Valium. Heroin is not known to be available in the area. The source of the illicit drugs is believed to be Athlone.

Among the travelling youth alcohol use is again reported. It appears to be about the same prevalence as among the travelling youth in Galway city, except that girls have more freedom and some girls under 18 years old may drink, but only a very small percentage. The use of volatile substances is reported to have lessened among the travellers recently.

There are high concentrations of young people in council housing estates e.g. Hymany Park, where there are about 200 teenagers in circumstances not unlike those of the council estates in Galway city. However substance use is reported to occur right across the social spectrum and not just in disadvantaged areas.

4. Tuam

The youth workers in Tuam believe that underage drinking is quite prevalent in Tuam. The authorities are reported to be increasingly vigilant in recent years, so that whereas 4-5 years ago those under 18 years old could buy alcohol in pubs, shops and off-licences, only an occasional pub would now sell alcohol to minors. The I.D. card scheme for youth is also now more strictly enforced in Tuam.

Illicit drug use among the youth is not very prevalent, however it is a problem which did not exist 10 years ago. Cannabis is the main illicit drug which is reported. Occasionally there are reports of tablets LSD etc., but no “hard” drugs. The source of the drugs is believed to be Galway city. There has been recent efforts made by schools and local people in Tuam at prevention of drug use among the young using TACADE, which is an U.K. drug education package. The use of this material has only recently started and it will be some time before the effects can be evaluated.

5. Loughrea

Loughrea is felt to have a very minor problem of illicit drug use among the youth. There have been no prosecutions for drugs in the past year, but there have been suspicions about cannabis use among a few people.

Underage drinking does occur. There have been a few prosecutions for this in the past 12 months. It is an ongoing problem, with children starting to drink at 14 - 15 years old. They drink mainly at the weekends, getting served in some pubs and discos despite Gardai efforts at clamping down on the serving of minors. Supermarkets do not sell alcohol to minors in the area.

6. Other towns in Co. Galway

Most other towns about which I have heard reports have very similar stories to Loughrea. It is believed that some "soft" drugs i.e. cannabis can be obtained in every town and village in Co. Galway, but its use does not appear to be very widespread. Underage drinking occurs in every town and village and may be more prevalent in rural areas where the authorities are unable to concentrate their efforts, though there would seem to be increased efforts made by them recently to curb underage drinking.

NEXT REPORT

In the next report I will include the information which I have obtained on the extent of underage drinking and illicit drug use among the youth in Co. Mayo and Co. Roscommon. I also hope to have the results of the pilot study of cigarette, alcohol and drug use which was done on 130 second level students in 5 schools in Galway city. I hope that the actual survey of second level schools and of training centres for early school leavers will be well under way at that stage. I have also surveyed all the general practitioners in the Western Health Board on their involvement with the topic and I will have compiled a report on their responses for my next report.

Signed:

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