

## **ESPAD (European Schools Project on Alcohol and other Drugs) project 2003 Report**

***Press Release, 14<sup>th</sup> December 2004***

The Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children, Mr Seán Power announced the publication of the 2003 ESPAD (European Schools Project on Alcohol and other Drugs) Report today. The ESPAD project began in 1994 with the assistance of the Pompidou Group at the Council of Europe and the Swedish Government, who both continue to support the project. The second report was published in 2001 and today sees the publishing of the third report in which 35 countries took part.

The ESPAD Project questionnaire consists of about 300 questions relating to behaviours, knowledge and beliefs concerning cigarettes, alcohol, solvents and illegal drugs. The Irish sample consisted of 2,407 young people born in 1987 (16 year olds) who were selected on a random basis from those attending various kinds of post-primary schools.

The data collection in Ireland was managed by Dr. Mark Morgan, St Patrick's College, Dublin and was funded by the Department of Health and Children. The international comparisons of the 35 countries was processed by the project co-ordinators in Sweden.

### **Main findings on Cigarettes**

The Minister said that "one of the clearest outcomes in the 2003 ESPAD study is that cigarette smoking has shown a substantial drop of about 10% among the 16 year old population." This drop applies to all measures of smoking and to boys and girls, although girls have for some years been 'ahead' of boys with regard to smoking.

What is especially encouraging about the results is that the fall is relatively greater in terms of the percentage who smoked during the previous month. This measure is sensitive to changes over the years, since lifetime smoking may refer to having smoked several years ago. With this measure, the fall is 4% from 1995 to 1999 and a further 4% in 2003. Put another way, the number of smokers has fallen by about one-fifth over the last eight years by this measure. This means that if we generalise to the population, about 10,000 less 16 year olds have smoked during the last month than in 1995. The fall in smoking is somewhat higher among boys but is still important and noticeable among girls.

### **Main Findings on Drugs**

The Minister stated that "in general, Irish students show a higher than average prevalence of lifetime use of any illicit drug. Ranking second in the table of 35 ESPAD participating countries, Ireland (8% increase on 1999) is just one of nine countries recording increased prevalence rates along with Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greenland, Hungary, Portugal and the Slovak Republic."

This trend is also reflected in data collected on lifetime use of marijuana/hashish, with Irish students (39%) almost twice as likely to have used this drug than the ESPAD average (21%). Although boys continue to show higher levels of use, of particular note is the increase in lifetime use among girls (from 29% in 1999 to 39% in 2003). However, it is heartening that the proportion of students reporting cannabis use in the past 30 days is much lower than the lifetime prevalence rates with Ireland slipping from second to fourth in the tables with static figures for use. Girls again show a substantial increase (5% since 1995) while boys show a substantially decreased prevalence (9% since 1995).

### **Main Findings on Alcohol**

While overall the results show no major increases in alcohol use among 16 year olds in Ireland, girls have increased consumption in spirits and alcopops between 1999 and 2003. However, the Minister emphasised that alcohol use and abuse among Irish adolescents continues to be a major problem. Beer is the most popular drink among boys and spirits and alcopops most popular drink among girls. The Minister also stated that “Ireland is ranked as the highest among the 35 European countries in terms of the number of adolescents who regularly binge drink and second highest in reported regular drunkenness.” Also, problems experienced by adolescents as a result of their own drinking in Ireland is twice the European average for individual problems such as damage to objects or clothing, loss of money or valuables, accident/injury and for delinquency problems such as scuffles or fights and trouble with the police. Although Western European countries (including Ireland) continue to have the highest rates of alcohol use and abuse.

### **Alcohol consumption in 2003**

- More girls than boys reported regular use of alcohol (i.e. consumed alcohol 20 times or more during the last 12 months, 39% vs 31%). Ireland is the only country where girls outdo boys.
- Irish 16 year old girls ranked 1<sup>st</sup> in the prevalence of overall regular alcohol use during the last 12 months.
- Quite large quantities of alcohol (101 cl or more) are consumed (during last drinking occasion) by nearly half of the boys who drink beer and nearly one-third of the girls who drink alcopops and spirits.
- Ireland has the second highest figures in Europe in relation to the consumption of large quantities of beer by boys (47%), alcopops (31%) and spirits (30%) by girls and the highest figure for cider consumption by boys (18%) and girls (10%).

### **Heavy Drinking and Drunkenness**

- Nearly one-third (30%) of 16 year olds have been drunk 10 or more times during the last 12 month, ranking 2<sup>nd</sup> in Europe after Denmark.
- Frequent episodes (3 or more times in last 30 days) of heavy drinking (called binge drinking and defined as 5 or more drinks in a single occasion) are common among one-third of girls and boys in Ireland, ranking 1<sup>st</sup> among European students. Same position as in 1999.

### **Access to alcohol**

There has been a decrease in the number of 16 year olds who reported having their last drinking occasion in the bar and pub (from 39% in 1999 to 24% in 2003) and an increase in accessing alcohol in someone else's home (from 15% in 1999 to 21% in 2003). There has also been an increase in the number of girls who reported their last drinking occasion on the street, park or beach (from 9% in 1999 to 12% in 2003). The home is a source of access for 13%. The disco as a place to consume alcohol showed a major decrease from 24% in 1999 to 11% in 2003.

### **Consequences of alcohol consumption**

The individual, relationship and delinquency problems experienced as a result of their own drinking is much higher among 16 year olds in Ireland than the European average in most of the measures. At least one in ten (12%) boys and girls in Ireland reported experiencing an accident or injury as a result of their own drinking in comparison to 6% European average. A similar finding was reported in relation to scuffles and fights and experiencing trouble with the police.

For further information on ESPAD, please contact the Press Office, Department of Health and Children, 01 6354000