

Drugs Offences –

TRENDS AND PATTERNS – 1970-1994

Sergeant Chris Gordon

Introduction

This article describes the evolution of a drugs problem in Irish society from the early 1970s. Broad trends pertaining to the types of drugs misused, the areas where misuse is most prevalent and demographic factors are examined. The drugs statistics cited derive from the annual Garda Síochána Reports on Crime, and describe **detected** drugs offences only. Accordingly, it would be unwise to rely on these statistics alone to provide a definitive statement of the prevalence of drugs misuse in this country. Nevertheless, general patterns and trends may be identified.

Increasing public awareness and concern about the current drugs situation are reflected in national opinion polls (ESRI, 1994) and media reports. Many commentators agree that the abuse of hard drugs has damaged the very fabric of several deprived inner-city communities in Dublin. However, the misuse of drugs is not confined to socially deprived individuals but has, particularly over recent years, penetrated all socio-economic groups. Thus, the numbers of young people exposed to drugs misuse are persistently increasing.

Drugs offences detected have trebled since 1989 to almost 4,600 in 1994. Increasing drugs-related crime and violence have also placed a heavy strain on the criminal justice system characterised by a shortage of prison accommodation and the redeployment of Garda resources to address the problem.



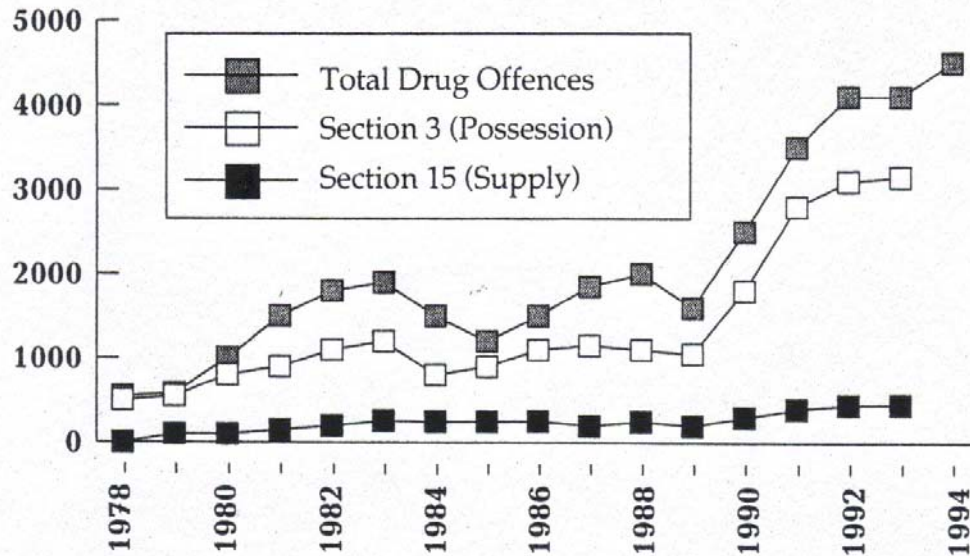
Sergeant Chris Gordon

Drugs offences

Figure 1 illustrates the numbers of prosecutions for all drugs offences between 1978 and 1994. In addition, annual prosecutions for offences under section 3 (unlawful possession of controlled drugs) and section 15 (unlawful possession of controlled drugs with intent to supply) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977/84 are shown. Three distinct trends emerge from the data: (i) there is a recurrent annual increase in the number of offences from the late 1970s to 1983. Concomitantly, the introduction and widespread abuse of heroin in the Greater Dublin area unfolded in this time period; (ii) there is a reduction and stabilisation of offences detected for the remainder of the 1980s; and (iii) there is an almost three-fold increase from 1,639

offences to 4,593 offences between 1989 and 1994. This final trend is perhaps the most striking and is a cause for concern.

Figure 1: Annual Prosecutions for all Drugs Offences, Possession and Supply Offences, 1978-1994.

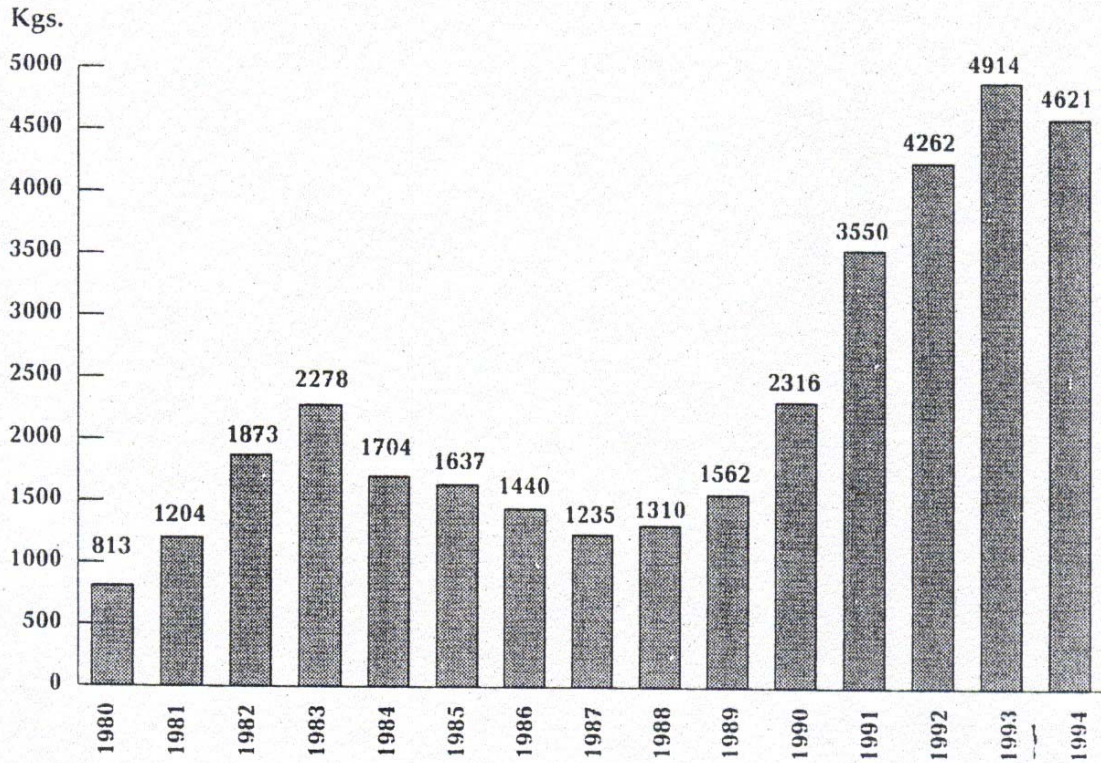


On average 70% of all known offences between 1978 and 1994 were for the possession of controlled drugs for personal use. Offences for the supply of illicit drugs have been on the increase since 1981. The networks of small-time dealers utilised by a major suppliers for 'pushing' heroin in various areas within Dublin account for many of these detections.

Seizures and persons charged by drug type

The number of annual seizures of controlled drugs between 1980 and 1994 are shown in Figure 2. It is important to note that an individual seizure may comprise an extremely small quantity of an illicit substance or a huge amount such as one of the largest seizures of cannabis (1,620kgs) which took place at Dublin Docks in 1981.

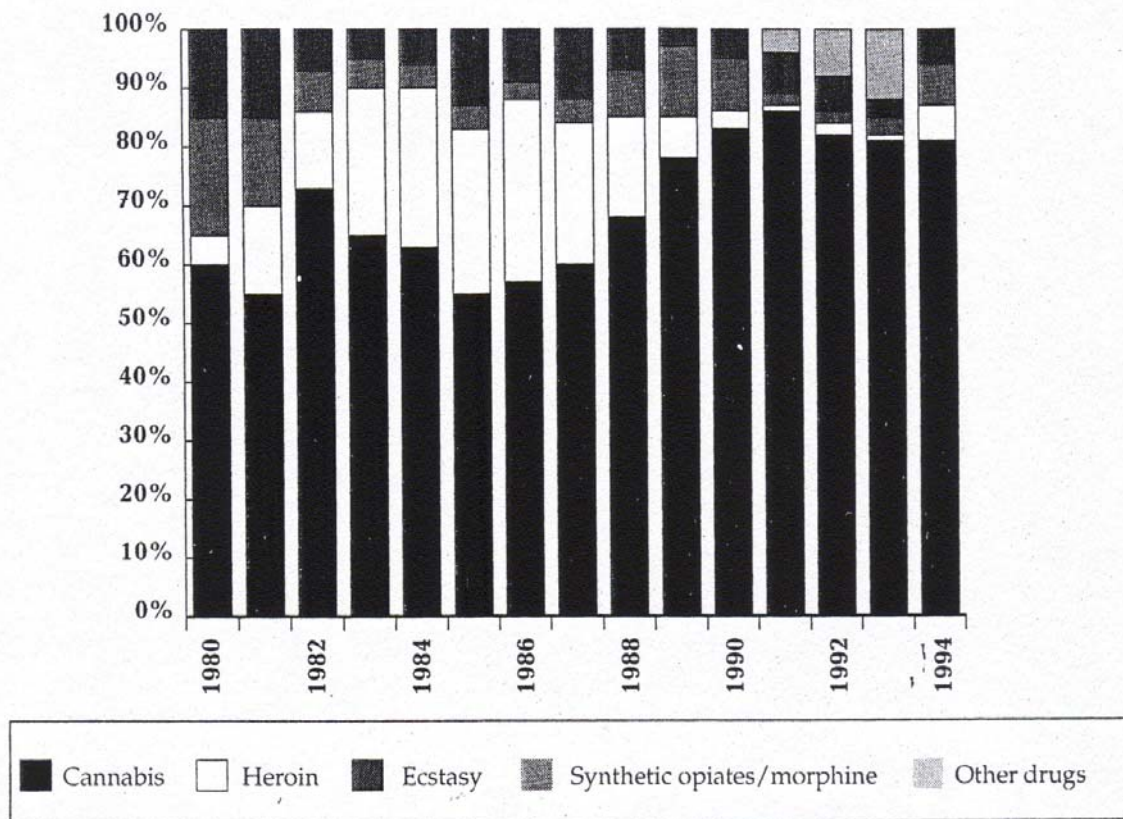
Figure 2: Sizes of Annual Seizures of Controlled Drugs, 1980-1994.



Cannabis

Cannabis has been the most widely misused drug in Ireland. Annual seizures of cannabis averaged about 20kgs during the 1970s, and this figure increased markedly in the early 1980s. The first major seizure of cannabis resin (520Kgs) took place at Dublin Docks in 1980. There was a sharp decline in the quantities of cannabis seized in the period between 1984 and 1987, but a subsequent increase has seen seizures peak at almost 5,000kgs in 1993. The popularity of cannabis is mirrored in the fact that approximately 70% of persons charged with drugs offences since 1971 were charged in respect of cannabis in its various forms (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of Persons Charged by Type of Drug, 1980-1994



Opiates

Garda statistics suggest that misuse of so-called *hard drugs* did not materialise as a serious problem until the late 1970s. Between 1970 and 1977 seizures were small with few opium-related charges. It was estimated that 90% of illicit supplies during the 1970s were obtained by larcenies from chemist shops. The introduction of heroin to Dublin by criminal gangs altered the situation dramatically. Heroin seizures advanced considerably between 1980 and 1986. An ensuing scarcity of the substance was compensated for by the misuse of morphine and Buprenorphine (a synthetic opiate). Gardai encountered the latter drug on a regular basis but possession was not an offence until 1987.

Almost 25% of drugs charges were opium-related during the ten-year period between 1978 and 1988. Seizures of heroin have increased in the past two years to almost 5,000 grammes in 1994, a quantity which is two and a half times greater than the previous highest annual quantity detected in 1986.

Health Research Board statistics (O'Higgins & O'Brien), on treated drugs misuse in the Greater Dublin area, reveal an increase in the number of opiate addicts receiving treatment in recent years. In 1993 about 2,500 individuals were receiving treatment. It is estimated by health authorities in other countries that about 40% of opium addicts are in treatment programmes at any one time. Applying this figure to Dublin would suggest a population of about 6,000 opiate addicts.

For the Garda Síochána, and indeed society as a whole, the above trend is extremely disturbing given the known association between crime and heroin misuse. Typically, heroin

users have been noted to engage in burglaries and robberies to acquire cash or property capable of being traded in order to satisfy their addiction.

Hallucinogens

MDMA (Ecstasy) and Lysergamide (LSD) are the most widely used and known drugs in this category. Both substances are intrinsic to the rave dance scene. Ecstasy was seized for the first time in 1991. The phenomenal growth in misuse is reflected in the amounts seized over a relatively short time span, from 29,000 tablets in 1994 to 180,000 tablets already in 1995. While Ecstasy is glamorised by some representatives of young people, those consuming the substance are placing their lives at risk. The drug has caused multiple deaths as happened in Scotland in 1993 when three teenagers died at a rave disco. In Ireland, it is estimated that 14 deaths this year can be attributed to the drug.

In the early 1970s, LSD was the second most commonly misused drug. Between the mid 1970s and 1990 seizures and charges for LSD were insignificant in terms of overall drugs detections. However, 16,364 tablets were seized in 1994, over half the volume of Ecstasy seizures indicating a resumption of the drug's earlier popularity.

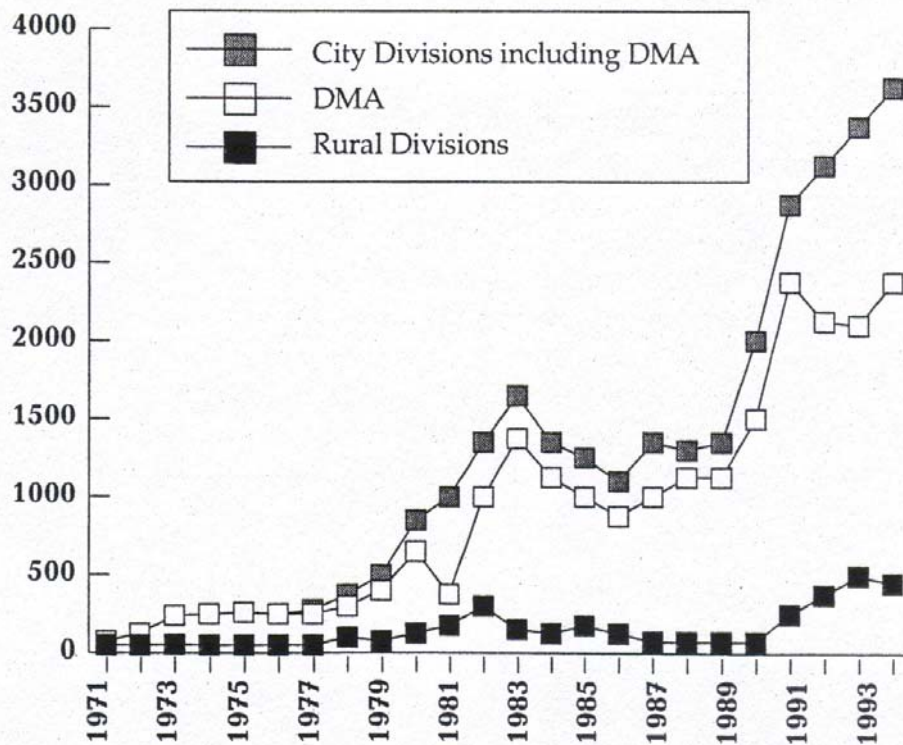
Cocaine

Unlike the experience of our European counterparts, there is little evidence in Garda statistics to indicate that misuse of cocaine, or its derivative crack cocaine, has been a problem in Ireland. It is an expensive drug and is predominantly used by individuals from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds in the Dublin area. The largest seizures in recent years (6kgs in 1993) have been found washed ashore on the west and south-west coasts.

Geographic spread of drugs offences

Statistics on persons charged with drugs offences in each of the Garda Divisions permit some inferences to be drawn on the relative extent of drugs misuse across the State. The country is arranged into twenty-three Divisions, (five of which are in the Dublin Metropolitan Area). For the most part Divisions correspond in area to a county, but some adjoining counties are grouped together to form one unit. A Chief Superintendent is in charge of each Division. Figure 4 illustrates the numbers of persons charged in connection with drugs offences in the DMA, in city divisions (DMA, Cork, Waterford, Limerick and Galway) and the fourteen rural divisions combined between 1971 and 1994. The statistics demonstrate that drugs misuse in Ireland was essentially an urban phenomenon, particularly in Dublin, up until 1990.

Figure 4: Annual Drug Offences Detected in DMA, City Divisions including DMA and Fourteen Rural Divisions Combined; 1971-1994.



The pattern emerging over the past three years indicates a substantial increase in the drugs problem in city divisions outside Dublin. Cork East and Waterford/Kilkenny Divisions are the most noteworthy. Since 1990, almost 20% of all persons charged with drugs offences were in the Cork East Division. The corresponding figure was 66% for the DMA. Table One below, compares, on the basis of population, average annual drugs prosecutions during 1993 and 1994 in the DMA, Cork East, Waterford/Kilkenny, Limerick and Galway West Divisions. The comparison suggests that drugs misuse is more pervasive in Cork East than in the DMA. Moreover, misuse in Waterford/Kilkenny Division is approaching similar proportions to the DMA. It should be emphasised that there is no supportive evidence to suggest that opiate misuse exists, to any great extent, outside the Greater Dublin Area.

Table 1

Division	Population*	Average Annual Drugs Charges 1993/94	Charges per 1000 of pop.	Population* aged 15-34	Charges per 1000 of 15-34 year olds
DMA	1,041,259	2,232	2.1	362,227	6.2
Cork East	305,934	786	2.6	99,290	7.9
Waterford	155,496	220	1.4	47,049	4.7
Limerick	162,093	145	0.9	51,345	2.8
Galway West	133,090	68	0.5	42,556	1.6

*Source: Central Statistics Office –1991 Census of Population.

Age and Gender of persons charged

Since 1975 crime reports have categorised persons charged with drugs offences by gender and age-grouping, i.e. under 17 years, between 17 and 21 years, and 21 years and over. Of the 32,000 persons charged between 1975 and 1994 almost 9 in 10 were male. This pattern was consistent across the three age categories for each year. The proportion of males involved in drugs misuse is supported by statistics on treatment for drug dependency in the Greater Dublin Area compiled by the Health Research Board. Of those in treatment, during 1992 and 1993, about 8 in 10 were male.

As regards age, over 75% of charges related to those over 21 years, 24% to those aged between 17 and 21 years with less than 1% under 17 years. The latter figure underestimates the extent of drugs misuse amongst those under 17 years as most detected cases are diverted to the juvenile referral scheme.

Conclusions

Although it is not possible to quantify the *real* extent of drugs misuse from Garda data, clearly the statistics substantiate the claims of an expanding drugs problem in Ireland. Increased specialisation and training throughout the force has considerably increased our detection rates. Statistics disclose significant increases in detections following the establishment of specialised drugs units in Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. Moreover, substantial increases in drugs detections since 1989 correspond with intensive drugs-related training for all probationer Gardaí.

The drugs situation has changed over recent years, the types of drugs misused and the amounts in circulation have altered: cannabis and Ecstasy are most widespread, and in far greater quantities than previously experienced in this country. The drugs problem is perhaps the most serious social issue facing our society, one that cannot be solved by law enforcement alone. It requires the co-ordination of all relevant public bodies and the implementation of an integrated and focussed set of policies.

References

Garda Síochána Annual Crime Reports, 1970-1994.

Economic and Social Research Institute (1994), "Report on Attitudes to the Gardaí Survey".

Mills H., "The Drug Culture: Changing attitudes put new focus on age-old problem". The Independent, London, March 2, 1994, p.2.

Inciardi Report (1978), "Policing the Drug Problem", Superintendent J. McGroarty, Garda News, December 1986.

O'Higgins K. & O'Brien M., Treated Drug Misuse in the Greater Dublin Area, Report for 1992 & 1993, The Health Research Board.