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Substance Use in Young Persons in Ireland, a Review
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Background:
• 22.5% of all deaths in the European region were directly caused by addictive substances¹.
• Adolescence is a time when people try many addictive substances for the first time².
• Experimenting with addictive substances at an early age increases the risk of polysubstance use³, problem drug use⁴, health⁵ and psychological⁶ problems.

Objective:
The objective of this study was to conduct a literature review with special emphasis on the prevalence of adolescent use of four commonly used substances in Ireland: tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, and benzodiazepines⁷.

Design:
The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Boolean searches were conducted on the following databases: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, ERIC, EMBASE, and CINAHL. Search terms used were adolescent, cannabis, tobacco, benzodiazepines, and Ireland. A manual search of the Health Research Board drug-related website, National Documentation Centre on Drug Use was conducted. Inclusion criteria were English language articles, and articles published from January 2000.

Results:
The study selection process is detailed in Figure 1.
The search returned 18 studies; 1 randomised control trial and 17 cross-sectional studies.
Eight studies looked at a single substance, while there was a single substance that looked at 2 substances. Five studies looked at 3 substances and four of the studies looked at all 4 substances.
There were 11 studies that surveyed a national population, while the other 7 studies sampled at provincial or county level.

Tobacco
• There were sixteen studies that examined tobacco use.
• Over the timeframe of this systematic review, there was a fall of lifetime usage levels from approximately 60% to 48%.
• A fall was also found in the percentage that smoked in the previous month from approximately 30% to 10-20%.

Alcohol
• There were eleven studies that examined alcohol use.
• Lifetime use of alcohol fell from approximately 90% to 60%, though some of the studies included in this section did not have rigorous design.

Cannabis
• There were nine studies that examined cannabis use.
• Previous 12-month usage fell from approximately 30% around 2002, to about 15% after 2009.
• Recent use of cannabis (use in the previous month) also fell from approximately 15% to 10%.

Benzodiazepines
• There were six studies that examined benzodiazepine use.
• Lifetime use of benzodiazepines remained constant at approximately 10%.
• Some studies differentiated between prescription use and non-prescription use. The latter was low but steady at 2.0-5.6%.

Conclusions:
• This review has shown that despite some decline, substance use is still quite prevalent within the adolescent population of Ireland.
• Continued tracking of substance use levels will elucidate whether this trend is short-term or long-term.
• Due to the serious consequences for both the substance user and for society as a whole, future work will examine the reasons underlying substance use.

Limitations:
• 13 of the 18 studies conducted their surveys on school children. This omits early school-leavers who are more likely to use both legal and illegal substances⁸.
• The questions asked in the studies varied, so only an approximate comparison was possible.

References available on request. Any comments should be directed to kev.mur21@gmail.com