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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 substances[1].
- Adolescence is a time when people try many addictive substances for the first time[2].
- Experimenting with addictive substances at an early age increases the risk of polysubstance use[3], problem drug use[4], health[5] and psychological[6] 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 benzodiazepines[7].

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.

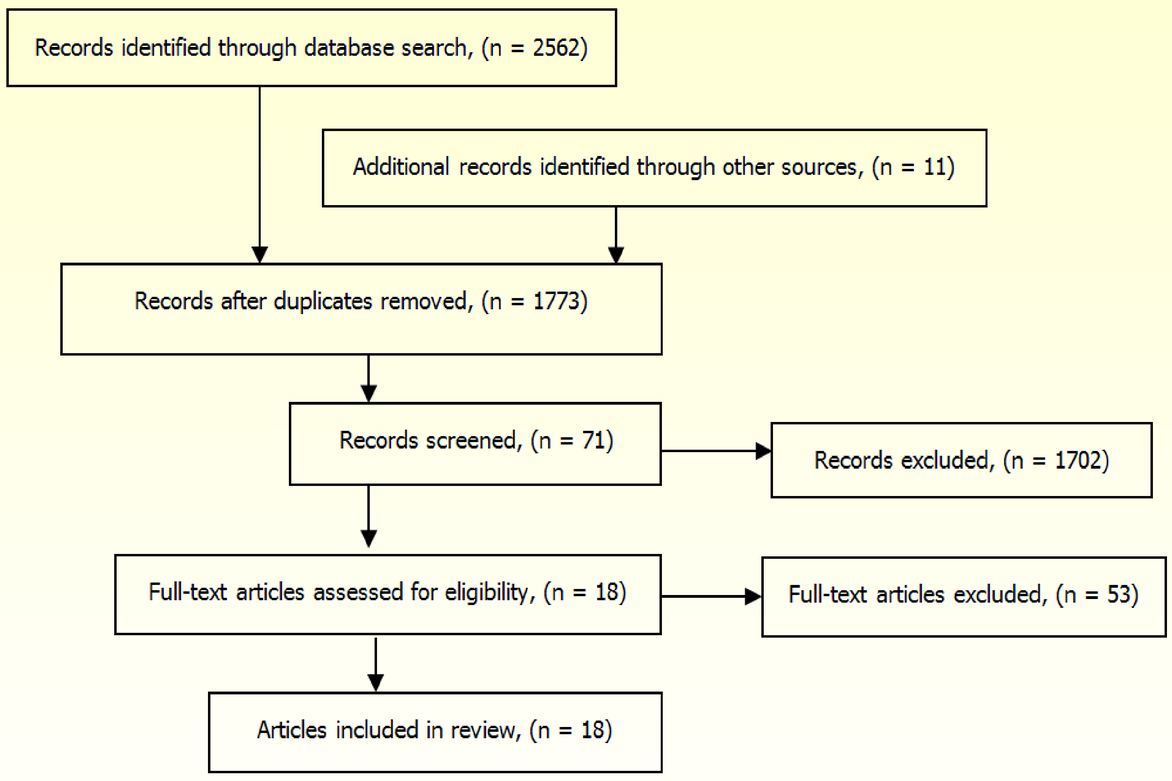


Figure 1. Study selection process using PRISMA diagram

- Early initiation of alcohol (prior to 13 years of age) levels fell by approximately 10% to 25%.

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 substances[8].
- 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