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Health Research Board

Drug use prevalence in Ireland:

Findings from recent population studies and estimates of problematic use



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A supplement to the Autumn 2025 issue of *Drugnet Ireland*

An Bord Taighde Sláinte
Health Research Board

New estimates of problematic opioid use in Ireland, 2020–2022

Background

Problematic opioid use is a significant problem in Ireland and across the world. However, measuring the prevalence of opioid use is challenging. Given the nature of this population, a simple head count is not feasible and general population surveys are known to be ineffective at capturing this 'hidden' population. Because people who use drugs fear stigmatisation and are often marginalised in society, the European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) recommends the use of indirect approaches, such as the capture-recapture (CRC) method, to estimate the prevalence of problematic (high-risk) drug users.[1]

To date, one regional and four national CRC studies have been conducted in Ireland to estimate the prevalence of problematic opioid use. These studies provided estimates for the years 1996, 2000–01, 2006, 2011–2014, and 2015–2019.[2,3,4,5,6] The 1996 regional study examined opioid use in Dublin only and used three data sources: the Health Service Executive (HSE) Central Treatment List (CTL), Hospital In-Patient Enquiry (HIPE) scheme data from four Dublin hospitals, and the An Garda Síochána arrest database. The 2000–01 and 2006 studies were three-source CRC studies that used national data from the CTL, the HIPE scheme and the An Garda Síochána PULSE (Police Using Leading Systems Effectively) database. The 2011–2014 and 2015–2019 studies both used four national data sources: the CTL data were divided into three sources (treatment clinics, general practitioners (GPs), and prison data), and the Probation Service was the fourth data source. In 2020, the Health Research Board (HRB) awarded a contract to the School of Public Health at University College Cork to conduct a fifth study on the prevalence of opioid use in the Republic of Ireland for the years 2020–2022. The methodology and main findings from this study are discussed below.[7]

Methods

Data on opioid use for the years 2020–2022 were collected from four sources: treatment clinics, general practitioners (GPs), the Irish Prison Service, and the Probation Service. Employing the CRC method, Poisson log-linear models were applied to the overlap data to find the model with the best fit to estimate the hidden population not identified by any of the data sources. Source-by-source interaction terms were tested by adding them to the base model in all possible combinations. The best model for estimating the size of the hidden population was determined by comparing the deviance to the chi-squared distribution and the Akaike information criterion (AIC) value. The simplest model with the lowest AIC value that provided a credible estimate was used.

Results

Table 1 presents a summary of the study's main results, stratified by Co Dublin versus the rest of Ireland, as well as by age group and sex. In 2022, it was estimated that there were approximately 19,460 individuals in Ireland with problematic opioid use (95% confidence interval (CI): 19,348–23,158), which equates to a prevalence rate of 5.79 per 1,000 population (95% CI: 5.76–6.89). A significant majority of these individuals

were male (67.9%), and more than two-thirds (75.3%) fell within the older age group of 35–64-year-olds. There were an estimated 11,100 problematic opioid users (95% CI: 10,684–13,761) in Co Dublin in 2022, reflecting a rate more than three times higher than that in the rest of Ireland (11.17 per 1,000 population (95% CI: 10.75–13.85), compared with 3.53 per 1,000 population (95% CI: 3.46–4.37).

Table 1: Summary of prevalence estimates of problematic opioid use (2022)

Breakdown	Known	Estimate	95% CI	Rate per 1,000 population	95% CI
Co Dublin	7,828	11,100	10,684–13,761	11.17	10.75–13.85
Rest of Ireland	4,891	8,360	8,189–10,346	3.53	3.46–4.37
15–24 years	264	527 (2.7%)	524–627	0.82	0.81–0.97
25–34 years	2,304	4,283 (22.0%)	4,258–5,097	6.82	6.78–8.12
35–64 years	10,151	14,650 (75.3%)	14,566–17,434	7.02	6.98–8.35
Male	8,989	13,218 (67.9%)	13,142–15,730	7.96	7.91–9.47
Female	3,730	6,242 (32.1%)	6,206–7,428	3.67	3.65–4.37
Total	**12,719**	**19,460**	**19,348–23,158**	**5.79**	**5.76–6.89**

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

Trends in problematic opioid use in Ireland over time

Data for the prevalence of problematic opioid use for the years 2020, 2021, 2022 are additionally presented to provide information on changes in trends over time (see Table 2). The overall estimated number of problematic opioid users remained stable between 2020 and 2022, as indicated by overlapping 95% CIs. However, the number of problematic opioid users aged 15–24 years decreased, from 685 (95% CI: 673–779) in 2020 to 527 (95% CI: 524–627) in 2022, which was a statistically significant decrease. No notable changes in the other age groups were observed.

Table 2: Comparison of estimated number of problematic opioid users over time (2020–2022), by age group

		2020			2021			2022	
Age group	Known	Estimate	95% CI	Known	Estimate	95% CI	Known	Estimate	95% CI
15–24 years	420	685	673–779	368	645	637–744	264	527	524–627
25–34 years	2,781	4,772	4,686–5,425	2,627	4,240	4,185–4,889	2,304	4,283	4,258–5,097
35–64 years	9,537	15,528	15,248–17,653	9,899	15,557	15,354–17,937	10,151	14,650	14,566–17,434
Total	**12,738**	**20,985**	**20,606–23,857**	**12,894**	**20,442**	**20,175–23,569**	**12,719**	**19,460**	**19,348–23,158**

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

This study represents the third national CRC study in Ireland to utilise four data sources: clinics, GPs, prisons, and the Probation Service. When comparing summary findings from previous studies with those shown in this report (Table 3), a stable overall estimated number of problematic opioid users was observed in Ireland between 2014 and 2022. There has been a slight decrease in the estimated number of problematic opioid users in Co Dublin; the estimated number of problematic opioid users living in the rest of Ireland outside of Co Dublin has increased from 5,530 (95% CI: 5,406–8,023) in 2014 to 8,360

(95% CI: 8,189–10,346) in 2022. However, these differences were not statistically significant based on overlapping 95% CIs. These data also show that there was no significant change in the proportion of male or female problematic opioid users during this period. Notably, there has been a significant decrease in the estimated number of problematic opioid users aged 15–24 years and aged 25–34 years (Figures 1 and 2), accompanied by a significant increase in the estimated number of problematic opioid users aged 35–64 years between 2011 and 2022 (Figure 3).

Table 3: Comparison of the estimated number of problematic opioid users in Ireland, 2014, 2019, and 2022

	2014		2019		2022	
Variable	**Estimate**	**95% CI**	**Estimate**	**95% CI**	**Estimate**	**95% CI**
Co Dublin	13,458	12,564–14,220	11,729	11,298–12,944	11,100	10,684–13,761
Rest of Ireland	5,530	5,406–8,023	8,146	7,885–9,160	8,360	8,189–10,346
Female	5,966	5,882–6,741	5,505	5,407–5,985	6,242	6,206–7,428
Male	13,022	12,838–14,713	14,370	14,115–15,623	13,218	13,142–15,730
Total	18,988	**18,720–21,454**	19,875	**19,522–21,608**	19,460	**19,348–23,158**

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

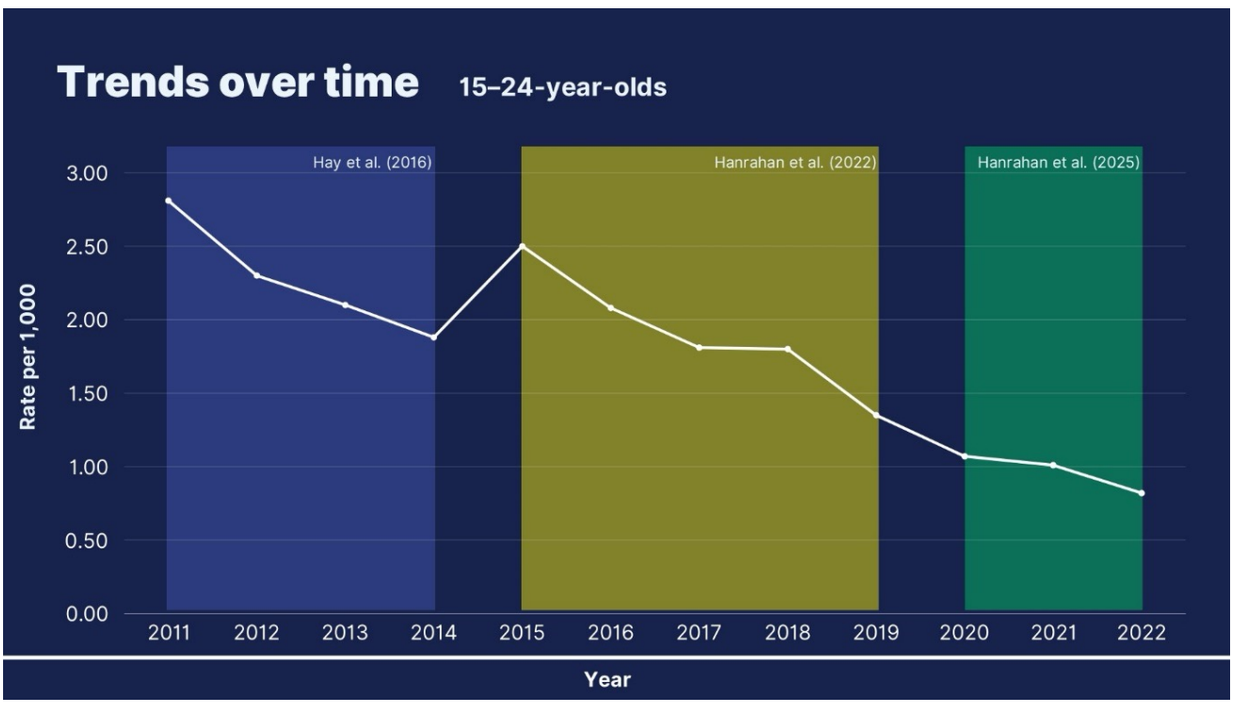


Figure 1: Comparison of estimated rate of problematic opioid users per 1,000 population over time (2011–2022), 15–24-year-olds

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

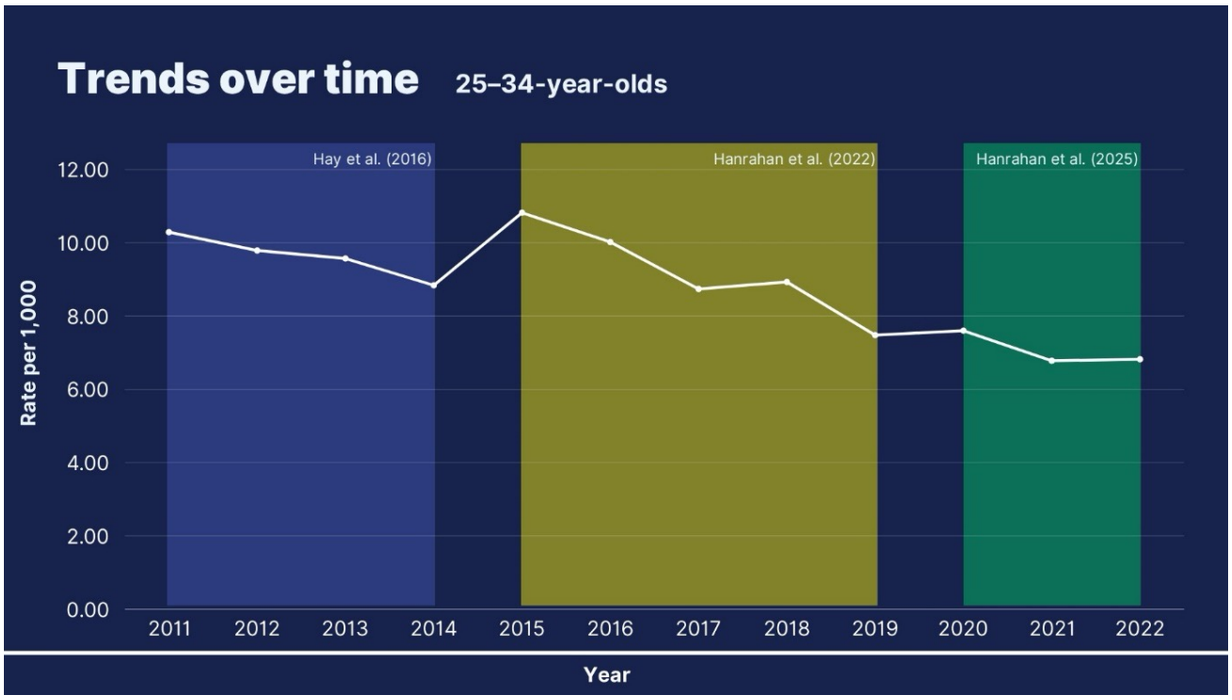


Figure 2: Comparison of estimated rate of problematic opioid users per 1,000 population over time (2011–2022), 25–34-year-olds

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

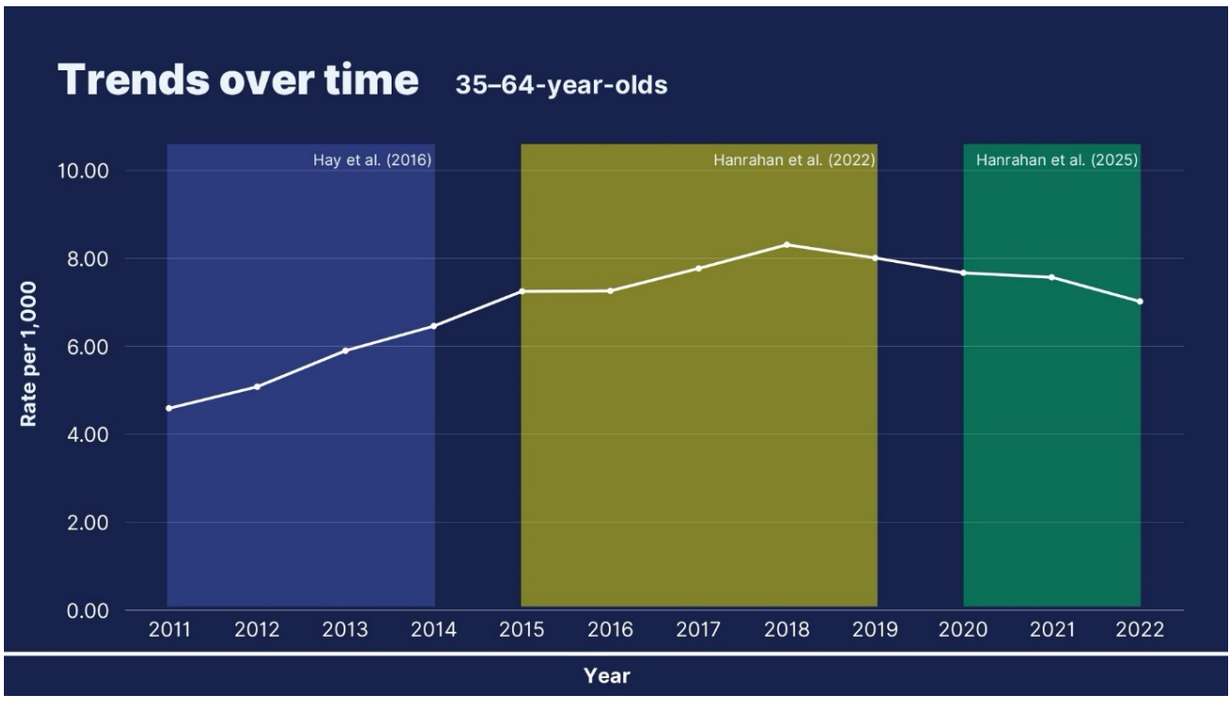


Figure 3: Comparison of estimated rate of problematic opioid users per 1,000 population over time (2011–2022), 35–64-year-olds

Source: Hanrahan *et al.* (2025)

Discussion

Comparing estimates of problematic opioid use in Ireland with those from other European Union (EU) member states is challenging, due to differences in methodologies and study years. However, the EUDA reports that national rates of high-risk opioid use in the EU range from fewer than 1 to nearly 10 users per 1,000 population aged 15–64 years.[8] Based on the *European Drug Report 2022: Trends and Developments* and data from this study, Ireland would rank sixth highest in the EU for problematic opioid use according to upper 95% CI estimates.[8] EU countries with higher estimates include Denmark (4.0–9.6 per 1,000 population), Finland (6.9–8.6 per 1,000 population), Italy (7.2–7.9 per 1,000 population), Latvia (4.6–7.0 per 1,000 population), and Portugal (3.0–7.0 per 1,000 population).[8] The United Kingdom (UK) also has high estimates, with rates of 8.1–8.6 per 1,000 population reported in 2018.[9] Notably, findings align with trends in other EU countries, where the majority of opioid users are male, and an ageing cohort effect is observed.[8] This may reflect improved harm reduction services that enable problematic opioid users to live longer. Additionally, changes in drug use behaviours are evident, with problematic opioid users initiating opioid use later in life, reducing injection practices, using opioids less frequently, and seeking treatment at later stages.[10]

In conclusion, the results from this study indicate that the overall number of problematic opioid users in Ireland remained stable from 2020 to 2022, but with a significant decrease observed in the 15–24-year-old age group. This decrease is a positive development, given the harmful and addictive nature of opioids. Nevertheless, opioid use prevalence estimates in Ireland remain high. Ongoing research in this area will be crucial for effective service planning and also to enable policy-makers to evaluate the impact of strategies aimed at reducing drug-related harms. Further targeted interventions may be needed in order to enhance the response to opioid misuse in Ireland, thus leading to better outcomes for affected individuals and communities.

Seán Millar

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An electronic copy of the report is available from the National Drugs Library at: www.drugsandalcohol.ie/42700

Results from the 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey on drug use in Ireland

Ireland has conducted five general population surveys on drug use (2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, 2014–15, and 2019–20). The first four surveys were conducted simultaneously in Ireland and Northern Ireland.[1] The 2019–20 survey was conducted in Ireland only and was managed by the Health Research Board (HRB), which commissioned Ipsos B&A to conduct this survey on its behalf.[2]

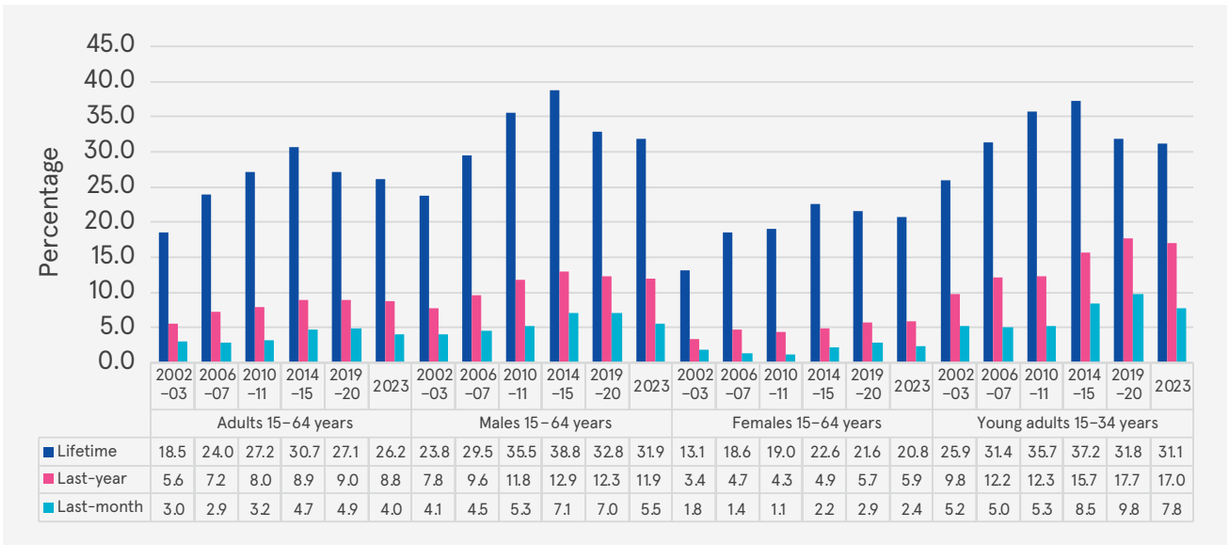
In 2022, the Department of Health Drugs Policy Unit and the HRB requested that questions on drug use prevalence be included in the 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey rather than undertaking a standalone study. Potential respondents were sampled using a two-stage telephone random digit dialling approach. Mobile phone numbers were used, as there is almost universal ownership of mobile phones in Ireland. Before proceeding with a telephone interview, informed consent was obtained from the individual and parental consent was obtained for those aged under 18 years. The survey response rate was 50%. The module on drug use was only included for respondents who opted into the module. A total of 6,407 out of the total 7,411 survey respondents agreed to participate in the drug use module, thus providing a participation rate of 86.5% of survey respondents, or 43.5% of the total sample. The sample was weighted by sex, education, work status of the respondent, and region, using population statistics from the Central Statistics Office, to ensure that it was representative of the general population. The main measures were lifetime use (ever used), last-year use (recent use), and last-month use (current use).[3]

Use of any illegal drug

The proportion of respondents aged 15–64 years who reported using any illicit drug in their lifetime has decreased slightly from 27.1% in 2019–20 to 26.2% in 2023 (see Figure 1). Similarly, last-year and last-month prevalence of any illegal drug use has remained stable since 2019–20; from 9.0% to 8.8% and 4.9% to 4.0%, respectively. 'Any illicit drug' refers to cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, ketamine, magic mushrooms, amphetamines, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and new psychoactive substances (NPS).

Illicit drug use was more prevalent in males and also greater among young adults, with 17.0% of persons aged 15–34 years having reported illegal drug use within the previous year (compared with 17.7% in 2019–20). Results from the 2023 survey indicated that the most commonly used illicit substances in Ireland, based on last-year prevalence, were cannabis (7.4%), cocaine (2.4%), ecstasy (1.0%) and magic mushrooms (1.0%).

Overall, those aged 15–24 years were most likely to report any drug use and this was particularly the case for cannabis and ketamine (Figure 2). Magic mushrooms use was most common among 25–24-year-olds, while similar proportions of 15–24-year-olds and 25–34-year-olds reported cocaine use.



	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023
	Adults 15–64 years						Males 15–64 years						Females 15–64 years						Young adults 15–34 years					
Lifetime	18.5	24.0	27.2	30.7	27.1	26.2	23.8	29.5	35.5	38.8	32.8	31.9	13.1	18.6	19.0	22.6	21.6	20.8	25.9	31.4	35.7	37.2	31.8	31.1
Last-year	5.6	7.2	8.0	8.9	9.0	8.8	7.8	9.6	11.8	12.9	12.3	11.9	3.4	4.7	4.3	4.9	5.7	5.9	9.8	12.2	12.3	15.7	17.7	17.0
Last-month	3.0	2.9	3.2	4.7	4.9	4.0	4.1	4.5	5.3	7.1	7.0	5.5	1.8	1.4	1.1	2.2	2.9	2.4	5.2	5.0	5.3	8.5	9.8	7.8

Figure 1: Lifetime, last-year and last-month prevalence of any illicit drug use in Ireland, 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, 2014–15, 2019–20, and 2023

Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

Note: Any illicit drug refers to cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, ketamine, magic mushrooms, amphetamines, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and new psychoactive substances (NPS).

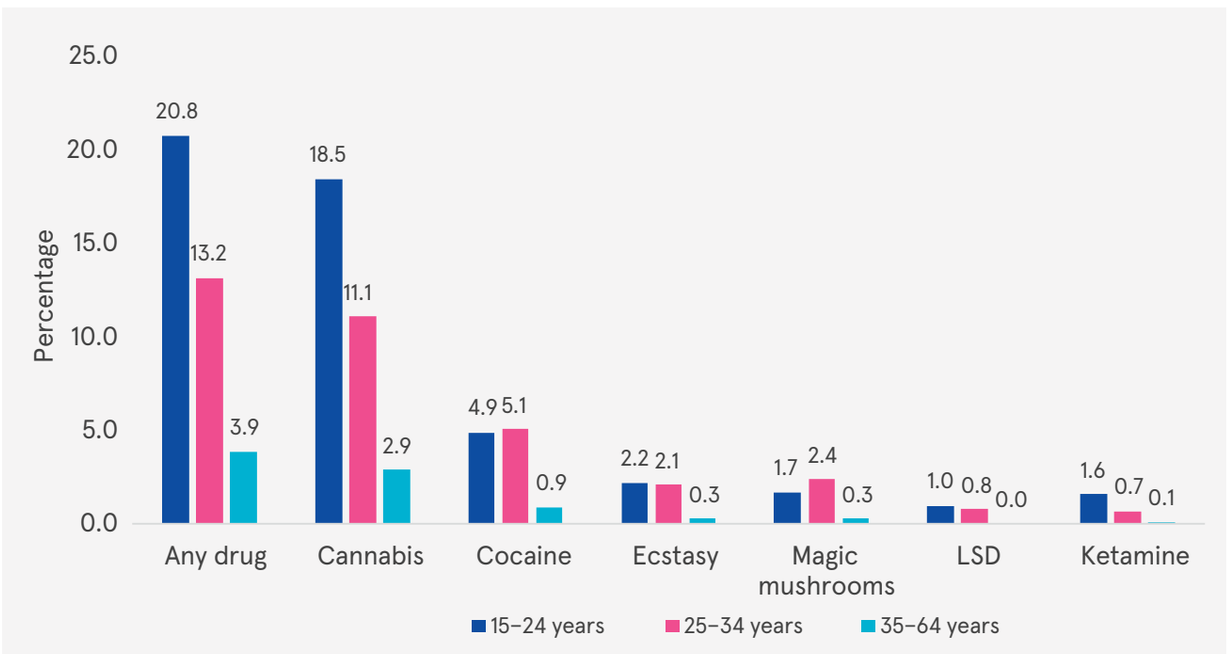


Figure 2: Recent use of illicit drugs, by drug type and age group

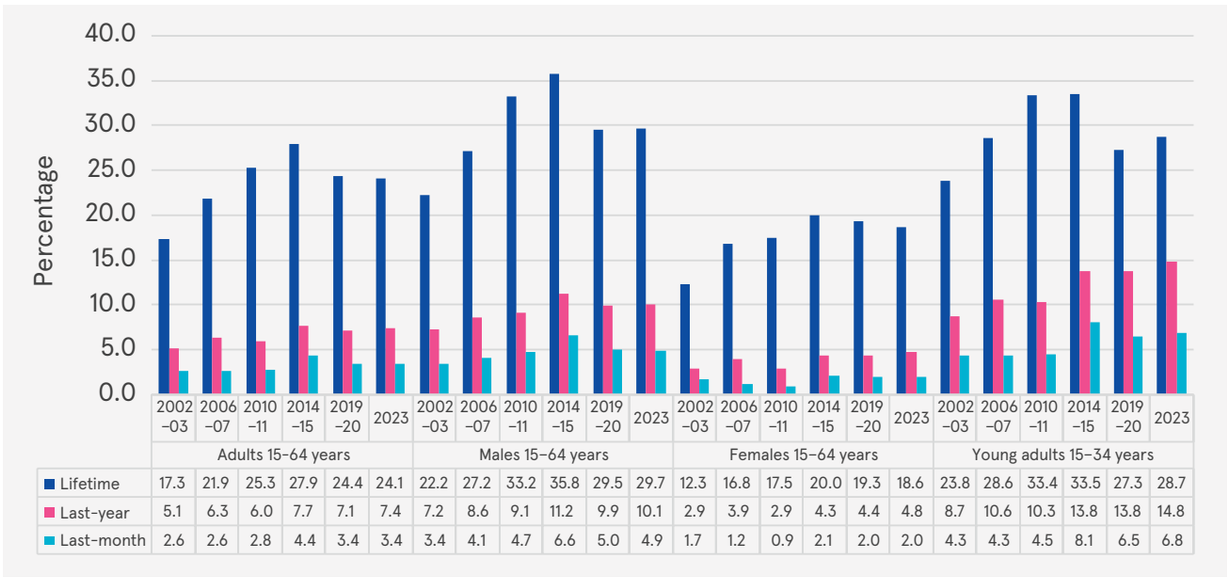
Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

Cannabis use

Findings from the survey revealed that 24.1% of the population (aged 15–64 years) had used cannabis at some point in their lives; 7.4% reported use in the year prior to the survey and 3.4% in the preceding month (see Figure 3).

Similar to earlier surveys, rates of cannabis use were greater among men than women: for lifetime use (29.7% versus 18.6%); last-year use (10.1% versus 4.8%); and last-month use (4.9% versus 2.0%). Since 2002–03, lifetime, last-year and last-month rates of cannabis use among males have increased by 33.8%, 40.3% and 44.1%, respectively. Lifetime and last-year use of cannabis among females has also increased. However, last-month prevalence in women has remained relatively stable over time.

The prevalence of cannabis use was noticeably higher among young adults, with lifetime, last-year and last-month rates being higher than those recorded in 2019–20, at 28.7%, 14.8% and 6.8%, respectively.



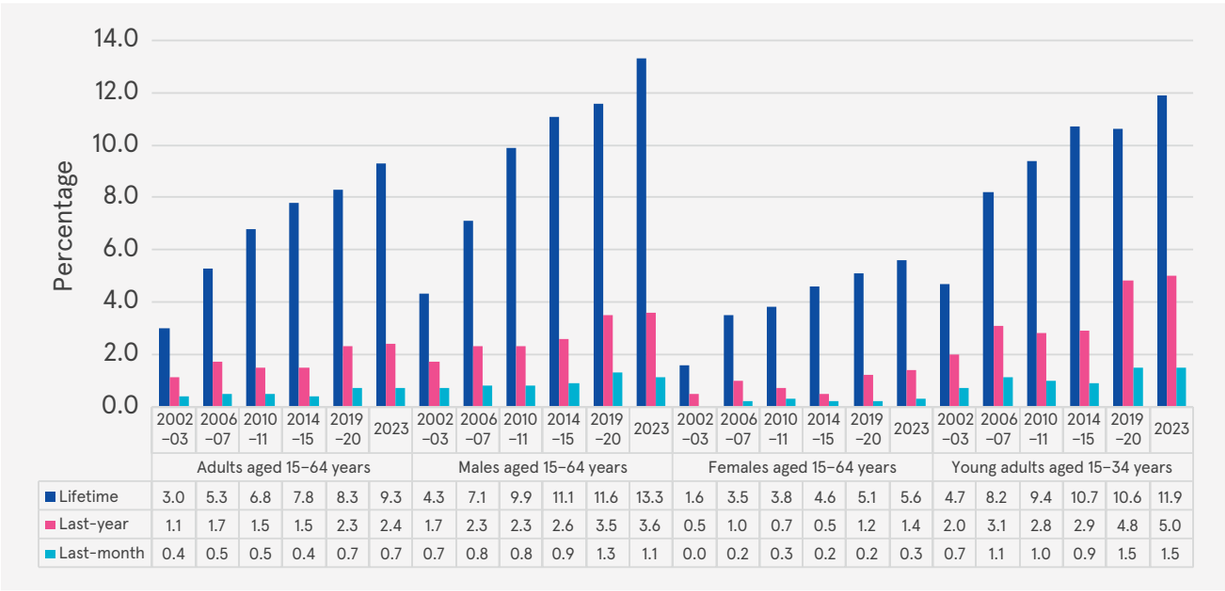
	Adults 15–64 years						Males 15–64 years						Females 15–64 years						Young adults 15–34 years					
	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023
Lifetime	17.3	21.9	25.3	27.9	24.4	24.1	22.2	27.2	33.2	35.8	29.5	29.7	12.3	16.8	17.5	20.0	19.3	18.6	23.8	28.6	33.4	33.5	27.3	28.7
Last-year	5.1	6.3	6.0	7.7	7.1	7.4	7.2	8.6	9.1	11.2	9.9	10.1	2.9	3.9	2.9	4.3	4.4	4.8	8.7	10.6	10.3	13.8	13.8	14.8
Last-month	2.6	2.6	2.8	4.4	3.4	3.4	3.4	4.1	4.7	6.6	5.0	4.9	1.7	1.2	0.9	2.1	2.0	2.0	4.3	4.3	4.5	8.1	6.5	6.8

Figure 3: Lifetime, last-year and last-month prevalence of cannabis use in Ireland, 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, 2014–15, 2019–20, and 2023
Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

Cocaine use

Lifetime cocaine use has increased when compared with 2019–20 rates (see Figure 4). The percentage of respondents aged 15–64 years who reported using cocaine (including crack) at some point in their lives increased from 8.3% to 9.3%. As was observed in previous surveys, more men than women reported using cocaine in their lifetime (13.3% versus 5.6%).

Since the 2019–20 survey, recent cocaine use among males and females has remained relatively stable, at 3.6% and 1.4%, respectively. Lifetime and last-year use of cocaine among young adults has increased slightly, from 10.6% to 11.9% and 4.8% to 5.0%, while current use among 15–34-years olds was unchanged at 1.5%.



	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023
	Adults aged 15–64 years						Males aged 15–64 years						Females aged 15–64 years						Young adults aged 15–34 years					
Lifetime	3.0	5.3	6.8	7.8	8.3	9.3	4.3	7.1	9.9	11.1	11.6	13.3	1.6	3.5	3.8	4.6	5.1	5.6	4.7	8.2	9.4	10.7	10.6	11.9
Last-year	1.1	1.7	1.5	1.5	2.3	2.4	1.7	2.3	2.3	2.6	3.5	3.6	0.5	1.0	0.7	0.5	1.2	1.4	2.0	3.1	2.8	2.9	4.8	5.0
Last-month	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.4	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8	0.9	1.3	1.1	0.0	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.7	1.1	1.0	0.9	1.5	1.5

Figure 4: Lifetime, last-year and last-month prevalence of cocaine use in Ireland, 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, 2014–15, 2019–20, and 2023

Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

Ecstasy use

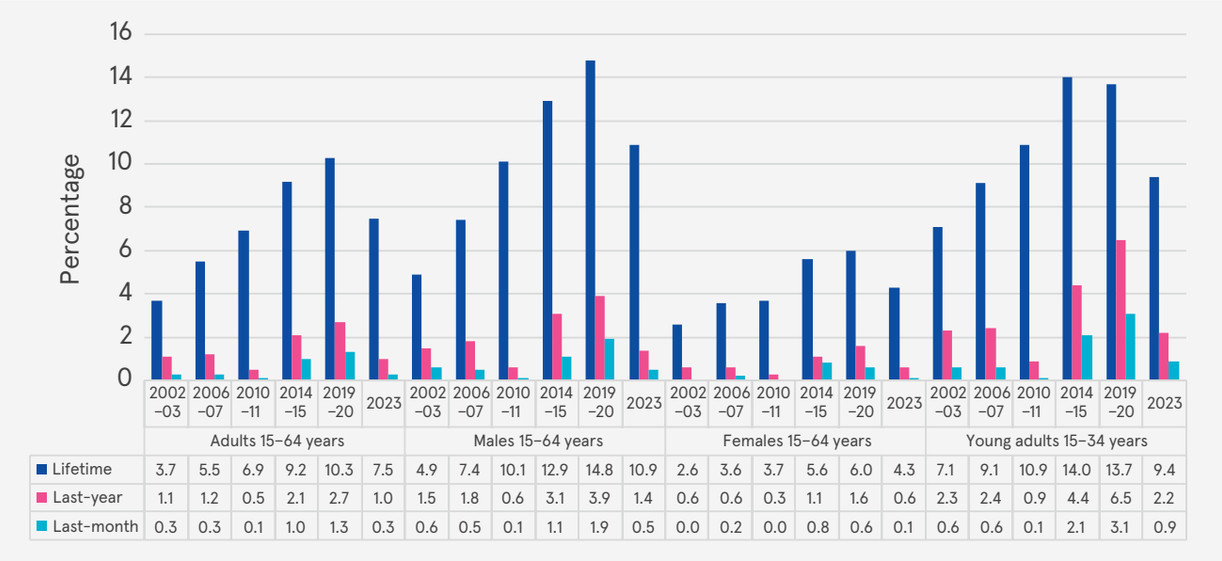
Results from the 2023 survey demonstrate notable reductions in the use of ecstasy (see Figure 5). In 2019–20, ecstasy was found to be the second most commonly used illegal drug in Ireland (after cannabis) in the year prior to the survey, at 2.7%. However, only 1.0% of survey respondents aged 15–64 years indicated last-year ecstasy use in 2023. Recent use of ecstasy among males and females declined from 3.9% to 1.4% and 1.6% to 0.6%, respectively.

Notable decreases in ecstasy use were also observed among those aged 15–34 years. In 2023, 9.4% of young adults said they had tried ecstasy at least once in their lifetime (compared with 13.7% in 2019–20), 2.2% had tried it in the last year (compared with 6.5% in 2019–20) and less than 1.0% indicated current ecstasy use (compared with 3.1% in 2019–20).

Sedative/tranquilliser use

Recent sedative/tranquilliser use was reported by 7.0% of the adult population, with females more likely than males to report use (10.2% versus 3.7%). Those aged 65 years and older were more likely than younger age groups to report recent sedative/tranquilliser use (9.8%). Females aged 65 years and older had the highest prevalence of recent use (14.8%), while males aged 25–34 years had the lowest prevalence, at 1.4% (see Figure 6).

Of those who had used sedatives/tranquillisers in the last year, 90.6% stated that all were prescribed, 5.8% stated that none were prescribed, and 3.6% stated that some were prescribed while others were not. Males were more likely than females to use sedatives/tranquilisers that were not prescribed (17.9% versus 6.6%). Younger respondents were also more likely to use non-prescribed sedatives/tranquillisers; 17.4% of 25–34-year-olds compared with 5.0% of those aged 65 years and over reported this.



	Adults 15–64 years						Males 15–64 years						Females 15–64 years						Young adults 15–34 years					
	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20	2023
Lifetime	3.7	5.5	6.9	9.2	10.3	7.5	4.9	7.4	10.1	12.9	14.8	10.9	2.6	3.6	3.7	5.6	6.0	4.3	7.1	9.1	10.9	14.0	13.7	9.4
Last-year	1.1	1.2	0.5	2.1	2.7	1.0	1.5	1.8	0.6	3.1	3.9	1.4	0.6	0.6	0.3	1.1	1.6	0.6	2.3	2.4	0.9	4.4	6.5	2.2
Last-month	0.3	0.3	0.1	1.0	1.3	0.3	0.6	0.5	0.1	1.1	1.9	0.5	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.8	0.6	0.1	0.6	0.6	0.1	2.1	3.1	0.9

Figure 5: Lifetime, last-year and last-month prevalence of ecstasy use in Ireland, 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, 2014–15, 2019–20, and 2023
Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

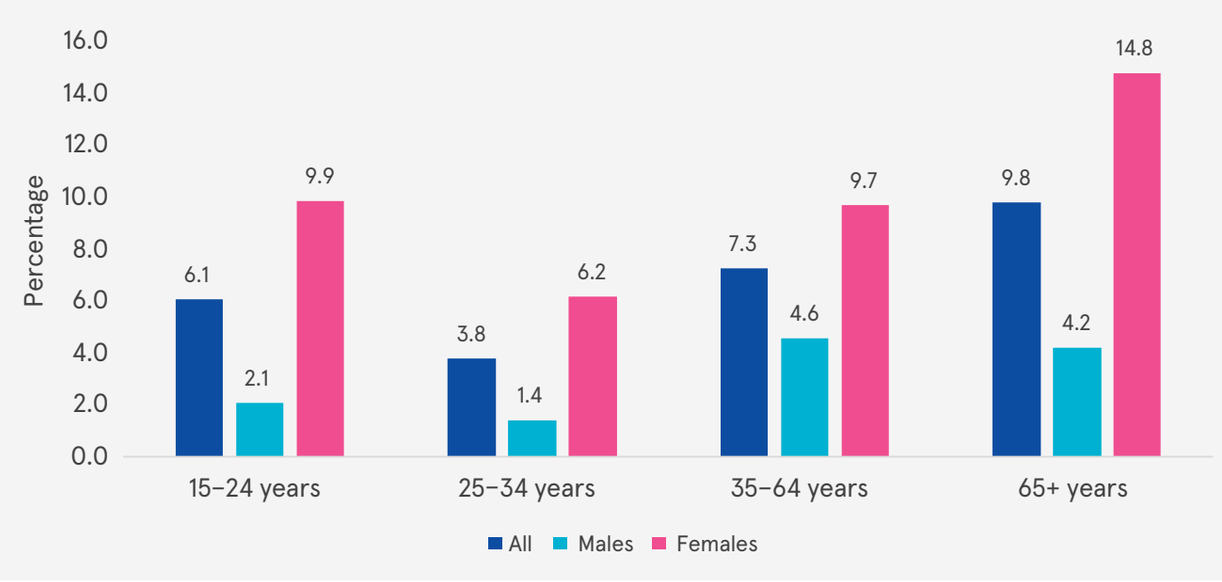


Figure 6: Last-year use of sedatives/tranquillisers, by sex and age group
Source: Mongan *et al.* (2025)

Conclusion

Although results from the 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey suggest that the prevalence of illicit drug use has stabilised in Ireland, there have been changes regarding the types of drugs used, with notable reductions in the use of ecstasy, while the prevalence of cocaine use remains high. Although NPS use was included as a drug category in the 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey, results demonstrate that the prevalence of recent NPS use remains very low in Ireland, at 0.3% (compared with 0.8% in 2019–20). This likely highlights the

continued impact of the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010, which made the sale, import, export, or advertisement of unregulated psychoactive substances for human consumption illegal. The Act also gave appropriate powers to An Garda Síochána and the courts to intervene quickly in order to prevent trade in a non-criminal procedure via the use of prohibition and closure orders.

It should also be noted that it is not possible to assess what impact the change in survey mode and sampling procedure has had on respondents' answers. Therefore, caution is recommended when comparing findings from the 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey with previous drug prevalence surveys conducted in Ireland. In addition, unlike previous surveys, it is not possible in this Healthy Ireland Survey to report results by level of deprivation, Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force area or Community Health Organisation area.

Seán Millar and Deirdre Mongan

1 National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol and Department of Health (UK) (2016) *Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland and drug use in Northern Ireland. Bulletin 1.* Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/26364/

2 Mongan D, Millar SR and Galvin B (2021) *The 2019–20 Irish National Drug and Alcohol Survey: main findings.* Dublin: Health Research Board. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/34287/

3 Mongan D, Millar SR and Galvin B (2025) *Drug use in Ireland 2023: findings from the Healthy Ireland survey.* Dublin: Health Research Board. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/43420/

Substance use among Irish 15–16-year-olds: new findings from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, 2024

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire. ESPAD Ireland 2024 was conducted in collaboration with the ESPAD Europe Coordinating Team and collected information on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other substances among 15–16-year-old students.

An important goal of the ESPAD is to monitor trends in substance use and compare trends between countries and groups of countries. It also provides an opportunity to observe trends in substance use among Irish 15–16-year-olds. The rationale for the ESPAD is that school students are easily accessible and are at an age when the onset of substance use is likely to occur.

This article concentrates on substance use findings from the ESPAD conducted in Ireland in 2024, in which 5,587 questionnaires were completed by young people from 28 randomly selected post-primary schools.[1]

Of these participants, 2,002 were born in 2008 and were included in the international ESPAD dataset. This database was cleaned centrally by the ESPAD Coordinating Team, which resulted in a final analytic sample of 1,880 students in Ireland born in 2008, comparable with students in other ESPAD countries, and used for the analyses presented in this article.

Cannabis use

Participants were asked on how many occasions in their lifetime they had used cannabis. In 2024, 88% of students reported never using cannabis, while almost one in eight students (12%) had ever used it. In the total student population, 4% had used it 1–2 times, and 3% had used it at least 20 times. No significant sex differences were observed in lifetime cannabis use. Trends over time suggest that lifetime cannabis use among school-aged children in Ireland has stabilised and is greatly reduced since 2003, with a 69% reduction between 2003 and 2024 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Lifetime prevalence of cannabis use among 15–16-year-olds in Ireland, ESPAD 2003–2024

Lifetime cannabis use	2003 (%)	2007 (%)	2011 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2024 (%)
All participants	39	20	18	19	19	12

Source: ESPAD Ireland (2025)

Nearly one-third of students (29%) reported that obtaining cannabis would be 'fairly easy' or 'very easy', while 19.3% believed it would be 'impossible'. Age 14 years was the most frequently reported starting age (4%), and females were more likely to start using cannabis at age 14 years (5%), while male students were more likely to start using cannabis at age 15 years (5%). Among those who had used cannabis in the last 12 months (10%), 3.3% had often mixed it with tobacco.

Overall, 4.9% of students had used cannabis in the last 30 days, with 6% of males reporting last-month use, compared with 4% of females (Figure 1). In the total population, 2% had used cannabis 1–2 times, and 1% had used cannabis at least 20 times in the last 30 days. No significant sex differences were found in cannabis use frequency during this period.

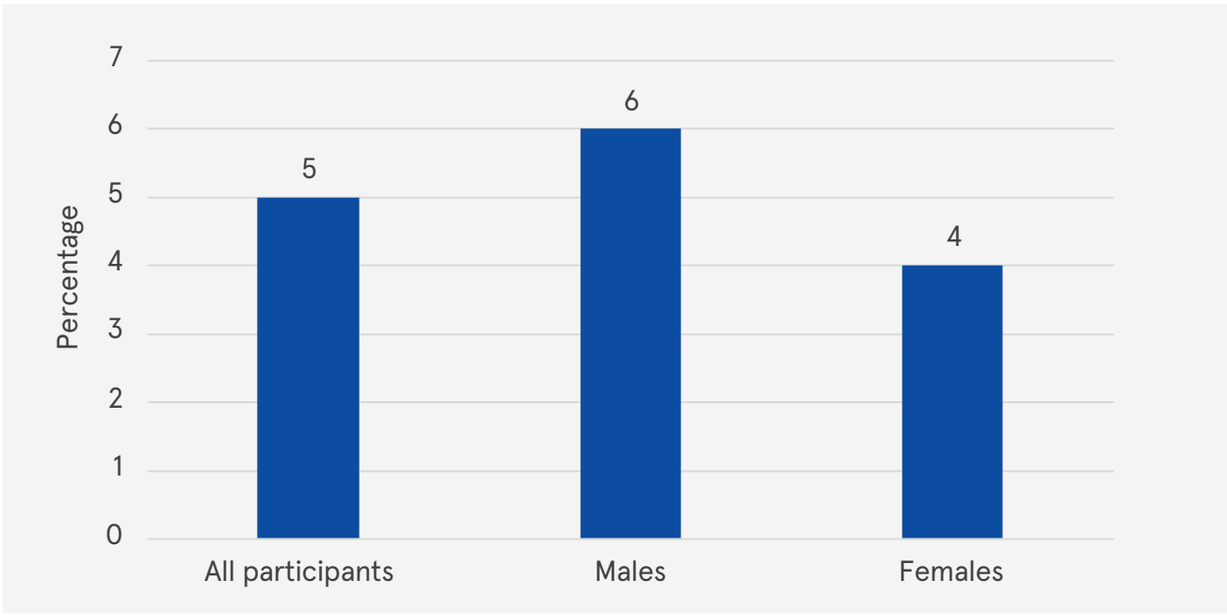


Figure 1: Cannabis use in the last 30 days among 15–16-year-olds in Ireland, ESPAD 2024

Source: ESPAD Ireland (2025)

Students were also asked about indicators of problem cannabis use in the last 12 months, using the Cannabis Abuse Screening Test (CAST). The CAST score measures the possible presence and extent of cannabis-related problems. Originally designed for teenagers, this test was adopted in 2007 by the ESPAD, and its psychometric properties have been assessed in representative samples of teenagers in several European countries.[2] Among the total sample (both users and non-users of cannabis in the last 12 months), 4% of students were classified as having high-risk cannabis use using this metric, and 96% were classified as being at low or no risk.

Other substance use

Regarding lifetime use of other substances, inhalants were the most commonly used substance, after cannabis, at 6%. The next most commonly used drugs were cocaine, ecstasy, magic mushrooms, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) and nitrous oxide, all at 2% (see Table 2).

An analysis of trends indicates an overall decrease in the use of most substances since 2003 among Irish 15–16-year-olds.

Table 2: Lifetime use of substances (other than cannabis) among 15–16-year-olds in Ireland, ESPAD 2003–2024

Drug	2003 (%)	2007 (%)	2011 (%)	2015 (%)	2019 (%)	2024(%)
Inhalants	18	15	9	10	10	6
Cocaine	3	4	3	2	3	2
Crack cocaine	2	4	2	1	2	1
Ecstasy	5	4	2	3	3	2
Magic mushrooms	4	4	2	2	3	2
LSD	2	3	2	2	3	2
Nitrous oxide	-	-	-	-	-	2
Amphetamines	1	3	2	2	2	1
Heroin	1	1	1	0.4	1	1
Ketamine	-	-	-	-	-	1

Source: ESPAD Ireland (2025)

Conclusion

In summary, the results from the 2024 ESPAD indicate a reduction in the use of cannabis, inhalants, and other substances. Nevertheless, it should be noted that early school-leavers, a group known to be vulnerable to drug use, are not represented in this survey. Consequently, the results may not indicate the true extent of drug use among all 15–16-year-old children in Ireland.

Seán Millar

1 Hanafin J, Sunday S, Fitzmarice H and Clancy L (2025) *ESPAD Ireland 2024: results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs*. Dublin: TobaccoFree Research Institute Ireland for the Department of Health Ireland. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/43291/

2 Legleye S, Eslami A and Bougeard S (2017) Assessing the structure of the CAST (Cannabis Abuse Screening Test) in 13 European countries using multigroup analyses. *Int J Methods Psychiatr Res*. 26(1):e1552.

Drug use among 25-year-olds in Ireland: results from the GUI study

Since 2006, the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) national longitudinal study of children and young people has followed a cohort of children born in 1998. Five waves of interviews have been conducted with this cohort when they were aged 9, 13, 17–18, 20, and 25 years. This article presents findings on drug use from 3,380 interviews with the 25-year-old participants, which were conducted in 2023–24.[1]

Any drug use

Figure 1 shows the prevalence of illicit drug use among 25-year-olds in the GUI study. Cannabis was the most prevalent drug, with 56.6% of respondents stating that they had ever tried it. Just over one-fifth (21.4%) of 25-year-olds reported ever having tried cocaine, and cocaine usage in the last year was more common for men (24.3%) than for women (18.6%). The other most commonly reported drugs were ecstasy (10.7%), ketamine (9.7%), and magic mushrooms (6.9%).

Current cannabis use

One in seven (14.2%) respondents said they were current cannabis users, and more men (16.1%) than women (12.3%) indicated current cannabis use (see Figure 2). Those who had at least an NFQ Level 7 or equivalent qualification and those who did not reported comparable rates of cannabis use (14.3% of those with such a qualification compared with 14.0% of those without).

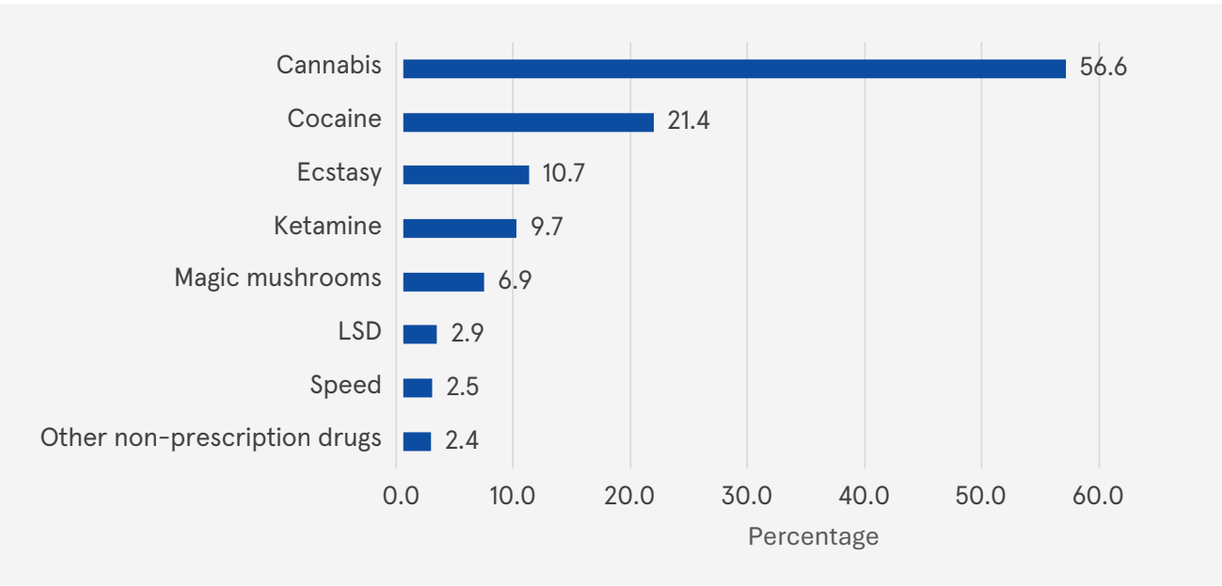


Figure 1: Lifetime illicit drug use among 25-year-olds in Ireland, 2023–24

Source: GUI Ireland (2025)

LSD: lysergic acid diethylamide.

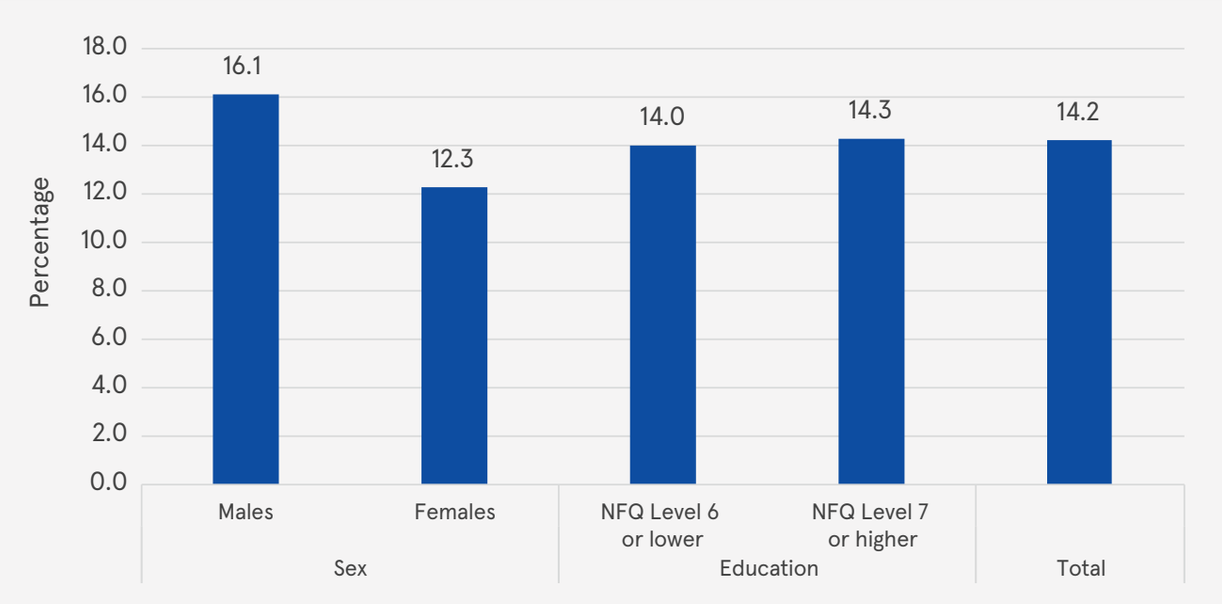


Figure 2: Percentage of 25-year-olds who indicated current cannabis use, 2023–24
Source: GUI Ireland (2025)

Seán Millar

1 Central Statistics Office (2025) *Growing Up in Ireland: Cohort '98 at age 25 main results.* Cork: Central Statistics Office. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/42586/

Cannabis use findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, 2022

The first Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study was conducted in Ireland in 1998 and has been repeated every 4 years ever since. In 2022, Ireland participated in the HBSC study for the seventh time. The survey included a representative sample of 9,071 children drawn from primary and post-primary schools across Ireland; 191 schools participated. Data were collected on general health, smoking, use of alcohol and other substances, food and dietary behaviour, exercise and physical activity, self-care, injuries, bullying, and sexual health behaviours. The main results were published in 2025.[1] This article describes results pertaining to the use of cannabis and makes comparisons with previous HBSC studies.

Cannabis use in the last year

Overall, 6.5% of 10–17-year-olds said that they had used cannabis in the last year. The prevalence of cannabis use increased with age, and a higher percentage of boys aged 10–14 years reported using cannabis compared with girls (see Table 1). Almost 13% of boys and 13.4% of girls aged 15–17 years reported having used cannabis in the last year.

Table 1: Percentage of 10–17-year-olds reporting cannabis use in the last year, by sex and age group, 2022

Age group	Boys (%)	Girls (%)
10–11 years	0.5	0.4
12–14 years	2.4	1.9
15–17 years	12.6	13.4

Source: HBSC Ireland (2025)

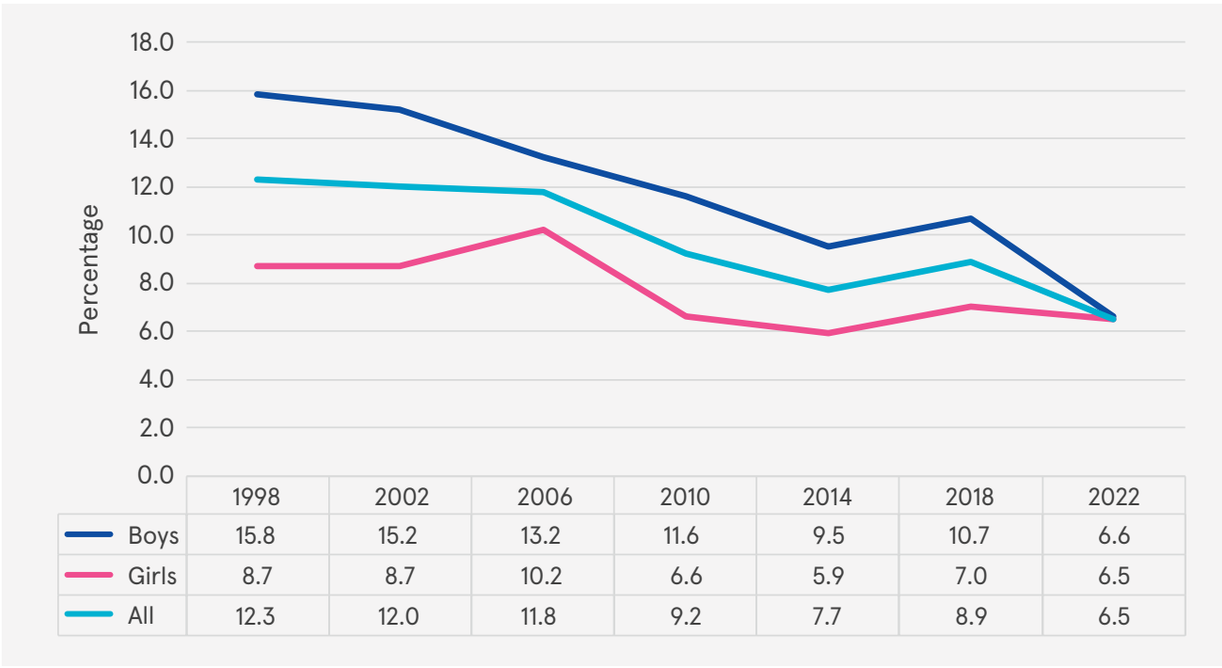


Figure 1: Percentage of 10–17-year-olds who reported cannabis use in the last 12 months, overall and by sex, from 1998 to 2022

Source: HBSC Ireland (2022)

Trends in cannabis use among Irish school-aged children, 1998–2022

Although a higher percentage of 10–17-year-olds reported having used cannabis in 2018 compared with the 2014 HBSC study (see Figure 1), there has been a steady decrease in the lifetime use of cannabis among school-aged children since 1998, with data from 2022 indicating an 82.1% reduction among boys and a 28.9% reduction among girls.

It is worth noting that these findings are from the first HBSC Ireland study conducted since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data were collected during a time when schools had recently reopened and when young people were readjusting following long periods of school closures and remote learning.

Consequently, these findings should be interpreted with this specific historical time frame in mind, considering the impacts of recent COVID-19 pandemic measures on young people's lives.

Seán Millar

1 Gavin A, Kolto A, Lunney L, *et al.* (2024) *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2022.* Galway: Department of Health and University of Galway. Available from: https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/40947/

Cannabis use among Irish adolescents: risk and protective factors

Cannabis remains the most widely used illicit substance among adolescents in Ireland, with new research shedding light on the factors that influence its use. A 2021 survey involving over 4,400 students aged 15–16 years in North Dublin, Cavan, and Monaghan revealed that 7.3% reported using cannabis in the past month. The study, part of the Planet Youth initiative based on the Icelandic Prevention Model, identified individual, familial, and peer-related factors related to cannabis use.

In this research, which has been published in the *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine,* peer cannabis use was found to increase the odds of a young person's cannabis use by over 10 times.[1] Perceived parental ambivalence and peer pressure also significantly elevated the likelihood of use. Moreover, adolescents who viewed cannabis as non-harmful – or who used alcohol, cigarettes, or e-cigarettes – were more likely to be cannabis users. Protective factors against adolescent cannabis use included strong parental disapproval, high levels of parental supervision, and the perception that cannabis use is harmful.

The authors propose that the findings have important implications for public health policy and highlight the need for targeted prevention strategies that address modifiable risk factors, such as peer influence and parental attitudes. They suggest that increased public awareness campaigns that clarify the risks associated with adolescent cannabis use, particularly in the context of growing social acceptance and legalisation debates, are urgently needed.

Seán Millar

1 O'Dowd TM, Fleury R, Power E, *et al.* (2025) Risk and protective factors for cannabis use in adolescence: a population-based survey in schools. *Ir J Psychol Med,* 42, (1) pp. 6–14.

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