

Press Release

Health Research Board reports latest drug-related deaths figures

Findings show an increase in poisonings and reflect both the rise of cocaine use and dangers of mixing drugs.

New preliminary figures from the Health Research Board (HRB) on drug-related deaths show there were 409 poisoning deaths in 2020.* There were also 397 non-poisoning deaths, with hanging the most common cause of these deaths. The findings were presented at the Citizens Assembly on Drug Use on Saturday 24 June 2023.

Commenting on the preliminary findings, Health Research Board Chief Executive, Dr Mairéad O'Driscoll said:

“These findings clearly demonstrate the impact that drug use has in Irish society. HRB findings increase understanding of both the causes death and the circumstances in which people who use drugs die. This can help inform preventative measures, which we hope will ultimately save lives.”

Dr Suzi Lyons, Senior Researcher at the Health Research Board, said:

“Our findings are a really important way of looking at the overall burden of drug use in the population.

We can clearly see that mixing drugs is a major factor in poisoning deaths. We also see that the growing prevalence of cocaine use in society is reflected in deaths with cocaine implicated in 130 deaths in 2020 compared to 24 in 2011. Hangings were a main cause of non-poisoning deaths. Three in five people who die by hanging, also had a known history of mental health issues”.

Key Findings

409 deaths were **poisonings** and 8 in 10 of these deaths involved ***more than one drug***

- 7 in 10 involved opioids. Methadone was implicated in 3 in 10 poisoning deaths and heroin was implicated 2 in 10 poisoning cases
- Almost 6 in 10 involved benzodiazepines and many of them had more than one type of benzodiazepine
- 3 in 10 involved cocaine
- 2 in 10 involved alcohol (as part of a poly drug poisoning)
- Almost 6 in 10 involved other prescription drugs, most commonly antidepressants and antiepileptics

Socio-demographic characteristics of people who died from poisoning

- More than 6 in 10 were male
- More than half of men were aged 42 years or younger
- More than half of women were aged 45 years or younger
- Half had a history of mental health issues
- 1 in 8 were homeless
- 1 in 5 had ever injected
- In 4 in 10 of poisoning deaths, the person was alone
- 11% died in homeless accommodation
- 9% died in a public place or building

There were 397 **non-poisoning deaths** among people with a history of drug use. These were primarily the result of **hanging or cardiac events**. A quarter (108) of non-poisoning deaths were as a result hanging. Of those, two thirds had a history of mental health issues.

These findings represent nearly 12,000 potential life years lost because of poisoning deaths and more than 10,000 potential life years lost because of non-poisoning deaths in just one year.

Tables which show trends over time are shown in the notes for editors.

*Figures presented in the release exclude alcohol only poisoning figures. In 2020 the number of alcohol-only poisonings was 65.

** Potential life years lost was calculated by looking at the age of individuals who died in 2020 and what their life expectancy would have been based on their year of birth.

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NOTE TO EDITORS

The Health Research Board (HRB) is Ireland's lead funding agency supporting innovative health research and delivering data and evidence that improves people's health and patient care. We are committed to putting people first, and ensuring data and evidence are used in policy and practice to overcome health challenges, advance health systems, and benefit society and economy.

In response to calls from families who had lost someone to a drug-related death and wanted to have these deaths recorded correctly, the National Drug Strategy (2001 to 2008) included an action to develop an accurate mechanism for recording the number of drug-related deaths in Ireland. This led to the establishment of the **National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI)** by the Health Research Board.

The data is collected from four data sources: **closed** Coronial files, Hospital In-Patient data (HIPE), the register of people on opioid substitution (Central Treatment List) and General

Mortality Registry data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). This preliminary report does not include data from the CSO for the years 2018 to 2020.

The NDRDI collects data from closed Coronial files, which usually means reporting data in arrears. This has been exacerbated in recent years because of limited access coroner's offices because of Covid-19 related public health restrictions. While these are preliminary figures we will aim to have a full report, including 2021 data, published in Q4 2023.

Drug-related deaths in Ireland 2020

Provisional data from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index (NDRDI)

Supplementary data tables

Table 1: Profile of poisoning deaths (excluding alcohol only), NDRDI 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409
Male	231	206	224	228	216	208	234	232	256	254
Female	83	75	117	91	111	106	106	122	115	155
Median age	38	36	39	37	40	40.5	42	41	41	42
Male	36	34	35	36	38	40	41	39	39	40
Female	44	46	45	41	45	43	45	47	47	45
Homeless	36	25	36	47	33	44	32	42	42	58
Had injected	67	65	79	85	77	78	72	86	88	82
History of mental health	107	117	161	140	187	156	171	185	187	212
<i>Place of incident</i>										
Private dwelling	239	199	231	236	266	238	248	264	272	308
Homeless accommodation	14	14	23	14	18	23	26	25	32	47
Public place or building	23	20	38	46	27	38	35	43	50	37
Other	38	48	49	23	16	15	31	22	17	17
<i>Accompanied by</i>										
Alone	148	100	141	142	143	129	148	155	143	174
Family, friends, or partner	132	114	119	138	134	132	121	126	171	157
Other	34	67	81	39	50	53	71	73	57	78

Table 2: Drugs implicated in poisoning deaths (excluding alcohol only), NDRDI 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409
Deaths with more than one drug implicated	228	195	240	241	233	228	238	271	291	323
<i>Drug group*</i>	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total number of poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409
Any opioid implicated	213	182	207	215	219	205	220	240	258	282
Any benzodiazepine implicated	170	129	163	164	147	147	150	196	186	228
Cocaine (powder or crack) implicated	24	26	32	42	46	42	55	78	105	130
Alcohol (as part of polydrug) implicated	80	54	82	70	69	81	68	69	87	81
Any other prescription drug implicated**	137	138	184	193	189	202	179	191	199	227
Others	52	49	84	79	57	56	76	62	89	91

<i>Individual drug type*</i>	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total number of poisoning deaths	314	281	341	319	327	314	340	354	371	409
Heroin	64	64	88	97	84	74	89	98	106	113
Methadone	116	87	94	105	91	105	101	122	123	139
Cocaine	24	26	32	42	46	42	55	78	105	130
Amphetamines	~	~	6	~	~	~	~	6	9	7
MDMA (Ecstasy)	11	12	14	15	8	9	16	16	15	11
Hallucinogens	~	0	0	~	~	0	0	~	~	~
Volatile inhalants	6	~	~	~	~	0	~	~	~	~
Non-opioid analgesics	21	23	32	33	26	39	46	29	45	49
Alcohol	80	54	82	70	69	81	68	69	87	81
Novel psychoactive substances	8	8	30	24	17	7	7	7	15	22
Diazepam	133	92	113	121	109	100	97	122	102	130
Flurazepam	50	30	42	36	35	43	35	47	30	30
Pregabalin	~	~	14	27	50	67	48	69	60	84

<i>Poly drug poisonings</i>	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
More than one opioid implicated	45	39	46	46	43	44	47	58	52	77
More than one benzodiazepine implicated	70	41	62	61	62	71	72	96	68	89
More than one other prescription drug implicated	48	53	76	96	94	102	98	93	97	119

* Multiresponse item table taking account of up to 10 drugs. Therefore, numbers in columns may not add up to totals shown, as individual cases do have more than one drug implicated in their death. Opioids include heroin, codeine or methadone for example; Benzodiazepines include diazepam or alprazolam for example; Other prescription drugs include antidepressants, non-benzodiazepine sedatives and anti-epileptics for example.

**Most commonly antidepressants and antiepileptics

~ Cells containing 5 cases or fewer

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Alcohol only poisonings (not included in totals above)	63	76	61	51	47	59	66	55	60	65

Table 3: Profile of non-poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2011-2020

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of non-poisoning deaths	270	304	308	359	374	411	439	408	474	397
Male	219	233	240	284	295	331	338	307	356	286
Female	51	71	68	75	79	80	101	101	118	111
Median age	39.5	39	41	39	42	40	42	42	43	44
Male	39	37	40	39	41	39	42	41	43	43
Female	40	42	48	42	44	43	45	45	44.5	51
Homeless	20	20	23	28	32	23	36	26	23	23
Had injected	52	66	63	67	83	83	56	52	50	36
History of mental health	84	110	118	146	151	166	190	178	223	166
<i>Type</i>										
Trauma	132	154	142	188	176	196	222	202	245	187
Medical	138	150	166	171	198	215	217	206	229	210
<i>Main cause of non-poisoning death</i>										
Hanging	69	75	80	97	89	98	127	115	137	108
Cardiovascular	47	47	56	52	56	58	72	62	87	75
Drowning	7	20	16	21	26	23	27	19	30	24
Fall	~	12	~	16	14	12	15	9	21	22
Respiratory infection	9	14	22	15	22	20	17	22	23	21
Other medical	82	90	88	104	125	140	130	125	124	117
Other trauma	51	46	42	54	42	60	51	56	52	30

~ Cells containing five cases or fewer