

## Drug prevalence information from Health Survey Northern Ireland 2017/18

### Pilot study

A pilot drugs module was included in the 2017/18 health survey. This information was previously captured through the [Drug Prevalence Survey](#), most recently in 2014/15. As part of the pilot, a question on last year prevalence of usage of a range of drugs was included.

Around 3,000 respondents completed the drugs module with the lead question 'Have you used or taken any of the following in the last year?'

The Health Survey includes respondents aged 16+ however for the purposes of comparison with the 2014/15 Drug Prevalence Survey that included respondents aged 15-64, only respondents aged 16-64 have been included in the statistics in this paper.

The findings from the pilot indicated similar levels of last year prevalence of illegal drugs compared with 2014/15. Direct comparisons are difficult due to the different survey source and methodology. The Drug Prevalence Survey as a stand alone drugs survey was able to collect much more detailed information than is possible in the health survey.

% of respondents	2017/18 HSNI	2014/15 DPS
<i>Any illegal drug*</i>	4.8	5.9
Cannabis	4.4	4.6
Ecstasy	0.5	0.8
Cocaine	0.9	1.8
Crack	0.0	0.3
Magic mushrooms	0.2	0.4
Amphetamines/speed	0.2	0.5
Poppers	0.1	1.1
LSD	0.1	0.5
Mephedrone	0.0	0.6
Other New Psychoactive Substances	0.0	0.3
Heroin	0.0	0.2
Solvents	0.1	0.0

Whilst similar results were found for overall use of *illegal drugs*, use of drugs such as antidepressants and sedatives were not of a similar nature. Much lower rates were reported in the health survey than would have been expected, potentially due to the blunt nature of the questions failing to pick up use of legally available drugs, with respondents instead focusing on reporting illicit drug use.

*\*Any illegal drug includes the drugs listed in the table.*

There are limitations in using a general population survey to estimate drug use. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction in their survey handbook<sup>1</sup> draw attention in particular to the fact that such surveys exclude those who are homeless and those living in institutions. Additionally, more chaotic drug users may be under-represented in household surveys. Whilst the limitations should be acknowledged, surveys do help gauge the extent of problematic drug use.

The health survey cannot produce a complete picture of drug misuse in Northern Ireland however it can be useful in capturing trend analysis for certain drug types.

**Next steps:** Further work will be undertaken to refine the survey questions with a view to including a drugs module in the 2020/21 health survey.

<sup>1</sup> European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Handbook for surveys on drug use among the general population. EMCDDA project CT.99.EP.08 B, Lisbon, EMCDDA, August 2002.