



PRESS RELEASE

HRB reports initial findings from drug-related deaths index

Thursday 6 November 2008 The number of drug-related deaths in Ireland increased from 242 in 1998 to 400 in 2005 according to a report published by the Health Research Board (HRB). Over the eight-year period 2,442 people died directly or indirectly from drug use. A total of 1,553 deaths were directly linked to the consumption of drugs, either alone or with other substances (poisoning), and 889 deaths were indirectly attributed to drug use (non-poisoning).

'Drug-related deaths are one measure of the impact of drug use in society and this report provides the first analysis of the total number of deaths related directly and indirectly to drug use in Ireland,' said Dr Suzi Lyons, Senior Researcher, Alcohol and Drug Research Unit at the HRB. 'The evidence we gather about drug-related deaths, enables policy makers to prioritise areas for intervention and measure the impact of such interventions in the future,' she explained.

Ireland has the fourth highest rate of drug-related deaths (poisonings) in Europe, after Estonia, Denmark and Luxembourg, with 54.2 deaths among every one million in the population. 'The European average is 20.9, but one of the reasons Ireland's rate appears so much higher than rates in other countries is a reflection of the level and quality of the information collected. Not all countries have monitoring systems that are so comprehensive, so the number of deaths they record will be lower', said Dr Lyons.

Key findings linked to **death by poisonings**, e.g. overdose, in Ireland between 1998 and 2005, show that:-

- Just over half of deaths by poisoning result from the use of more than one substance, including legal and illegal drugs.
- Opiates, including heroin, are still the main cause of deaths among people who die by poisoning.
- Cocaine was implicated in 100 of the deaths by poisoning and almost three out of four of these deaths involved a mix of drugs, including cocaine.
- One quarter of poisonings were as a result of alcohol in conjunction with another drug or substance.
- The majority of cases were male and aged between 20-40 years of age, which reflects the international experience.

'The one exception in this age profile is deaths by solvents,' said Dr Lyons. 'Between 1998 and 2005 solvent use resulted in 33 deaths either on their own or in conjunction with another substance. More than seven in every 10 deaths as a result of solvent misuse are under 19 and almost one-third are under 14 years-of-age, highlighting this specific risk among young people'.

'As we can see, illegal drugs are involved in many cases of drug-related deaths. However, prescribed drugs and over-the-counter medication, such as anti-anxiety drugs (valium), anti-depressants and painkillers are frequently involved in such deaths, either alone or in conjunction with illegal drugs. For example, Benzodiazepines, often combined with an illegal substance, have contributed to almost one in every three deaths by poisoning.' she explained.

Since 2003, the annual number of deaths by poisoning outside Dublin has surpassed the number of deaths in Dublin city and county. According to Dr Lyons, this reflects the fact that drug use is now a nationwide issue and not limited to the Dublin region as would have been the case in previous years.

Deaths by non-poisoning or deaths among drug-users could include infection with HIV as a result of sharing needles which may lead to death due to an AIDS-related illness or cardiac events due to cocaine use. Non-poisonings increased from 64 in 1998 to 168 in 2005. Almost seven in every 10 were between 20 and 40 years of age and more than four in every five were male. The number of non-poisonings over the eight-year period increased both in Dublin and throughout the country.

'We are still in the early stages of analysing data on deaths by non-poisonings, but the figures reflect the increasing number of people in the population consuming drugs, taking risks, developing dependencies and/or other illnesses associated with drug use,' explained Dr Lyons.

'The evidence that we have gathered indicates that the most significant response required is in relation to overdose, both addressing the root cause and developing actions to deal with potential overdose cases in a more proactive manner', she concluded.

HRB Trends Series 4, *Trends in Drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland, 1998 - 2005*, is available in the publications section of the HRB website at www.hrb.ie. For a hard copy of the report, please phone+ 353 1 2345127 or email adru@hrb.ie.

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