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Statistics and Research Branch

# Experience of Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey

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# Introduction

This Bulletin presents findings from a self-reporting module on drug misuse, contained within the 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS). The NICS is a personal interview survey of adults living in private households throughout Northern Ireland. The bulletin examines the prevalence and trends of illicit drug use among respondents aged 16-59 years old.

## Key Findings

- ◆ Twenty-six percent of Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) respondents reported having used at least one type of illicit drug at some time in their lives.
- ◆ 8% of respondents reported using at least one type of illicit drug in the twelve month period preceding the survey and 5% in the month preceding the survey.
- ◆ Cannabis was the most commonly used drug across all three recall periods; 19% of respondents claimed to have used it at some time in their lives, 6% had used it in the last year and 3% had used it in the last month.
- ◆ While respondents aged 25-34 had the highest prevalence (39%) of ever having used illicit drugs, 16-24 year old respondents reported the highest prevalence in relation to use within the last year (19%) and use within the last month (11%) (Table 6).
- ◆ Drug use in the last year among 16-24 year olds decreased significantly between 2001 and 2005 - down from 28% to 19%.
- ◆ Male respondents were significantly more likely than female respondents to have used illicit drugs. This was the case in each of the three recall periods; 32% of males and 21% of females had used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; 12% of males and 5% of females in the last year; 8% of males and 3% of females in the last month (Table 8).
- ◆ Overall last year (8%, 2005; 11%, 2001) and last month (5%, 2005; 7%, 2001) drug prevalence rates had declined significantly between 2001 and 2005 (Table 8).

## 1. Drug misuse statistics in Northern Ireland – setting the scene

The Misuse of Drugs Act classifies illicit drugs into three categories according to the harm that they cause, Class A drugs being considered the most harmful (Table 1). Amphetamines can be classified as either Class A (when prepared for injection) or Class B (powdered form). Likewise, tranquillisers can either be classified as Class B (e.g. barbiturates) or Class C (e.g. benzodiazepines). Cannabis was reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug on 29 January 2004. Raw magic mushrooms were classified as Class A on 18 July 2005 following the Drugs Act 2005 (prior to this only prepared magic mushrooms were classified as Class A drugs).

Table 1: Classification of drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

Classification	Drug
Class A	Cocaine Crack Ecstasy LSD Magic mushrooms Heroin Methadone
Class A/B	Amphetamines
Class B/C	Tranquillisers
Class C	Anabolic steroids Cannabis
Not classified	Amyl Nitrate Glues

## 2. Lifetime Prevalence (2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey)

More than one quarter (26%) of NICS respondents in 2005 reported having used at least one type of illicit drug at some time in their lives (Table 3).

### 2.1 Gender

Cannabis had the highest reported usage among both males (24%) and females (14%). Males reported higher lifetime prevalence than females of use of each type of illicit drug. The prevalence of cocaine use among males (6%) was three times the rate among females (2%).

Male respondents (32%) were significantly more likely than female respondents (21%) to have used at least one illicit drug at some time in their lives.

### 2.2 Age

Although lifetime prevalence rates for individual drugs varied with age, respondents aged 25 - 34 had the highest levels of usage for ten of the thirteen illicit drugs asked about in the survey. Lifetime use of the highly addictive drugs heroin, crack and methadone was less than one percent across all three age groups.

Lifetime prevalence rates were highest amongst the two younger age groups. Those aged 16-24 years and aged 25-34 years reported similar prevalence rates at 36% and 39% respectively. In comparison 19% of the 35-59 year old age group reported having used illicit drugs in their lifetime.

### 2.3 Drug Type

Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, with 19% of all respondents claiming to have used at some time. 16-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds reported similar levels of cannabis use at some point in their lives (29% each), compared with 12% of 35-59 year olds. Amphetamines (7%) and ecstasy (6%) were the next most commonly reported drugs to have been used.

## 3. Last Year Prevalence (2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey)

In the twelve month period preceding the survey 8% of NICS respondents had reported using at least one type of illicit drug (Table 4). Use in the last year provides a more accurate indicator of current trends of drug use compared with lifetime use statistics (see Technical Notes)

### 3.1 Gender

Males (12%) were significantly more likely than females (5%) to have used one or more illicit drugs in the last year.

### 3.2 Age

Almost one in five (19%) respondents aged 16-24 years have used at least one type of illicit drug in the past year. This compares with 11% of 25-34 year olds and 4% of 35-59 year olds. Cannabis use is significantly higher amongst the 16-24 year old group (16%) compared with the other two age categories. With the exception of cannabis (2%), use of individual illicit drugs in the past year among 35-59 year olds is at levels of less than 0.5%.

### 3.3 Drug Type

In the 12 months prior to the survey, cannabis (6%) was the most commonly used drug among survey respondents. Ecstasy (2%) was next most commonly used drug, followed by cocaine and amphetamines (1% each). The other illicit drugs surveyed were each used by less than one percent of respondents. Males (9%) were three times more likely than females (3%) to have used cannabis in the last year.

## 4. Last Month Prevalence (2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey)

Almost five percent of respondents reported having taken at least one illicit drug in the month preceding the survey (Table 5).

### 4.1 Gender

Males (7%) were significantly more likely than females (2%) to have used at least one illicit drug in the last month.

### 4.2 Age

In the month prior to the survey, 11% of 16-24 year olds had used an illicit drug. This compared with 6% of 25-34 year olds and 2% of 35-59 year olds. Cannabis use was significantly higher amongst 16-24 year olds (9%) than in any other age group.

### 4.3 Drug Type

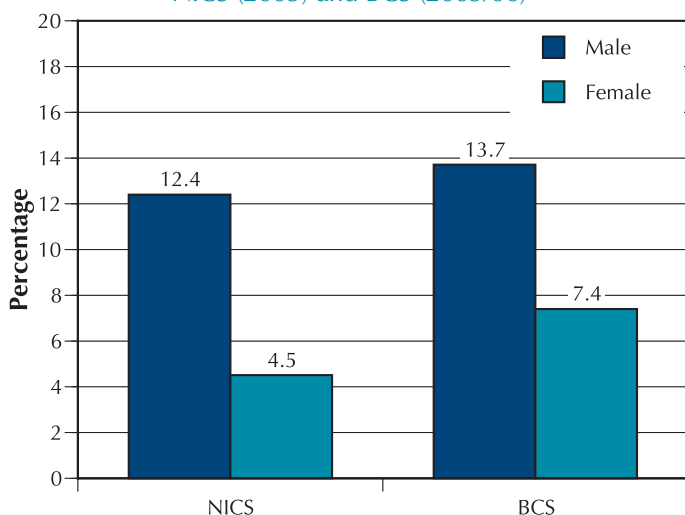
Cannabis (3%) was the main illicit drug used in the month preceding the survey. None of the survey respondents reported having used crack, heroin, LSD or magic mushrooms in the last month.

## 5. 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey and 2005/06 British Crime Survey findings

A comparative analysis of the 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey and 2005/06 British Crime Survey (BCS) suggests that the prevalence of drug use was greater in England & Wales than in Northern Ireland across all categories in each of the three recall periods. NICS findings indicated that prevalence of lifetime (26%), last year (8%) and last month (5%) usage compared with corresponding rates in the BCS findings, of 35%, 11% and 6% respectively (Table 6).

Trends across the three recall periods and across age and gender categories followed a similar pattern in both surveys. Focusing particularly on use in the last year, males (12%, NICS; 14% BCS) were more likely than females (5%, NICS; 7%, BCS) to have used one or more illicit drugs (Figure 1). Likewise, use of any drug during the last year was most prevalent amongst 16-24 year olds (24%, NICS; 25%, BCS).

Figure 1: Prevalence of drug use in the last year by gender, NICS (2005) and BCS (2005/06)



Analysis of use of specific illicit drugs during the past year indicates that cannabis (6%, NICS; 9%, BCS) had the highest prevalence in both surveys. Ecstasy use (2%, NICS; 2%, BCS) was the same in both jurisdictions. Cocaine use in the last year was 1% (NICS) in Northern Ireland and 2% (BCS) in England and Wales (Table 7).

## 6. Comparative analysis of 2001, 2003/04 and 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Surveys

A comparative analysis of the three recent crime surveys indicated that the lifetime use of any drug was similar (26%, 2005; 27%, 2003/04; 26%, 2001). However, the overall last year (8%, 2005; 11%, 2001) and last month (5%, 2005; 7%, 2001) prevalence rates had declined significantly between 2001 and 2005 (Table 8).

Analysis of any drug use during the last year indicated that prevalence of any drug use was highest amongst 16-24 year olds in each of the last three surveys (19%, 2005; 24%, 2003/04; 28%, 2001). It is also worth noting that there was a statistically significant decline in drug use in the last year among this group between 2001 and 2005. Among the 25-34 year old age group the prevalence was 11% in 2005, 14% in 2003/04 and 13% in 2001. Prevalence was similar in each of the last three surveys for the 35-59 year old group (4%).

Analysis of specific drugs used in the last year indicated that cannabis (6%, 2005; 6% 2003/04; 7%, 2001) had the highest reported usage in each of the three surveys. The decrease in cannabis use between 2001 and 2005 was statistically significant. Ecstasy (2%, 2005; 2%, 2003/04; 3%, 2001) was reported as the second most commonly used drug in each of the surveys (Table 7).

## TECHNICAL NOTES

### Sampling and fieldwork for the NICS

The initial sample consisted of 6,420 addresses randomly selected from the Valuation and Lands Agency domestic property database. The full list of addresses was stratified into three regions Belfast, East Northern Ireland and West Northern Ireland.

Visits to each address by an interviewer from the NISRA Central Survey Unit resulted in an eligible sample of 5,737 occupied addresses, from which attempts were made to interview one randomly selected respondent at each address.

Selecting only one person at each address means that individuals living in large households have a lower chance of being included in the sample than those living in small households. Accordingly, the data presented in this publication have been weighted by household size to prevent a bias towards small household sizes.

The fieldwork for this NICS spanned a twelve month period, from January 2005 to December 2005. During this time, 3,687 people aged 16 years and over completed interviews. Of these, 2,545 respondents were aged between 16 to 59 years. 160 of the respondents aged 16 to 59 refused to participate in the self completion drugs module and a further four were discounted for methodological reasons, giving a final sample size of 2,381. This represents an eligible response rate of 93.6%.

2005 NICS self-completion drugs module sample profile

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Male</b>	1,097
	<b>Female</b>	1,284
<b>Age group</b>	<b>16-24</b>	317
	<b>25-34</b>	571
	<b>35-59</b>	1,493
<b>Region *</b>	<b>Belfast</b>	350
	<b>East NI</b>	1,108
	<b>West NI</b>	895

\* Excludes 28 cases where this data was missing

Respondents were assured in advance that any information they would provide would be treated as confidential and that the level of detail produced in publications or in any subsequent analyses would not allow them to be individually identified.

**Rounding and statistical significance**

Non-valid responses have been excluded from the analyses. Percentages may not always sum to 100 due to the effect of rounding or because respondents could give more than one answer.

Statistical significance tests have been carried out on a range of group differences observed within the NICS 2005 survey findings. These tests are used to establish the degree of confidence with which we can infer the observed findings as an accurate reflection of the views of the population.

For the purpose of this bulletin, where group differences have emerged as being statistically significant, this has been reported at the 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ) level of probability (two-tailed). This means that, for any observed result that is found to be significant, we are 95% confident that this has not happened by chance.

**Recall Periods**

The NICS asks respondents about drug use in each of three recall periods, lifetime, last year and last month. Lifetime use of a drug is a good indicator of the percentage of respondents who have used one or more drugs at some point in their life. However it does not provide an indicator of current patterns of drug use. While use in the last month does provide a good indication of very recent drug use, it is also subject to seasonal variations in respondent's use and contains a lower base number of respondents. Consequently it is a weaker statistic to measure very rarely used drugs. For these reasons, use of drugs in the last year is

normally considered the best indicator available to measure trends in recent drug use. It is less affected by seasonal variation in respondent's use and provides a larger base for analysis of rarely used drugs.

**Self-Report**

The use of self-reported surveys to obtain information on illicit drug taking has its limitations. Firstly, sampling private households inevitably excludes the more habitual drug user who may be homeless or living in residential institutions. Secondly, some respondents will be reluctant to disclose information relating to illegal behaviour regardless of the level of confidentiality. However, the NICS is a consistent instrument deployed in the same manner for each sweep.

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**Table 3: Lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use, 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey**

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	26.2	32.0	21.0	35.9	39.1	18.7
Amphetamine	6.6	8.8	4.6	8.6	13.7	3.4
Cannabis	18.9	24.1	14.1	28.9	28.7	12.4
Cocaine	3.8	5.7	1.9	6.6	7.0	1.8
Crack	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.4	0.7	0.4
Ecstasy	5.9	7.5	4.4	10.7	13.7	1.6
Heroin	0.5	0.8	0.1	0.7	0.7	0.4
LSD	3.2	4.7	1.9	1.3	8.7	1.7
Magic Mushrooms	4.6	6.9	2.5	4.6	7.6	3.4
Methadone	0.3	0.6	0.1	0.4	0.5	0.2
Tranquilisers	2.7	3.3	2.1	3.3	3.4	2.2
Amyl Nitrate	4.9	6.8	3.2	7.4	10.7	2.0
Steroids	1.0	1.6	0.6	1.1	1.6	0.8
Glues	2.4	3.8	1.1	4.6	3.7	1.2
Unweighted base	<b>2381</b>	<b>1097</b>	<b>1284</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>571</b>	<b>1493</b>

**Table 4: Last year prevalence of illicit drug use, 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey**

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	8.2	12.4	4.5	18.8	10.6	4.3
Amphetamine	1.0	1.7	0.4	2.4	1.6	0.4
Cannabis	5.8	9.1	2.9	15.7	7.7	2.3
Cocaine	1.0	1.5	0.5	2.6	1.6	0.3
Crack	*	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
Ecstasy	1.6	2.5	0.7	4.6	3.0	0.3
Heroin	0.1	0.2	0	0.7	0	0
LSD	0.2	0.2	0.1	0	0.2	0.3
Magic Mushrooms	0.2	0.5	0.1	1.3	0	0.1
Methadone	*	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
Tranquilisers	0.5	0.8	0.1	1.3	0.4	0.3
Amyl Nitrate	0.7	1.0	0.5	2.4	0.9	0.1
Steroids	0.3	0.4	0.1	1.1	0	0.1
Glues	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0
Unweighted base	<b>2381</b>	<b>1097</b>	<b>1284</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>571</b>	<b>1493</b>

**Table 5: Last month prevalence of illicit drug use, 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Survey**

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	4.9	7.5	2.5	11.3	6.4	2.4
Amphetamine	0.4	0.7	0.1	1.1	0.4	0.1
Cannabis	3.4	5.3	1.6	9.1	4.3	1.4
Cocaine	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.7	0.1
Crack	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ecstasy	0.4	0.8	0.1	1.5	0.5	0.1
Heroin	0	0	0	0	0	0
LSD	0	0	0	0	0	0
Magic Mushrooms	0	0	0	0	0	0
Methadone	*	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
Tranquilisers	0.1	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.2	0.1
Amyl Nitrate	0.2	0.4	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.1
Steroids	0.2	0.4	0	0.7	0	0.1
Glues	*	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
Unweighted base	<b>2381</b>	<b>1097</b>	<b>1284</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>571</b>	<b>1493</b>

\* Less than 0.1%

**Table 6: Prevalence of illicit drug use in the last year by age, 2005 NICS and 2005/06 British Crime Survey**

	NICS			BCS		
	Lifetime	Last year	Last month	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
<b>All respondents</b>	26.2	8.2	4.9	34.9	10.5	6.3
<b>16-24 years</b>	35.9	18.8	11.3	45.1	25.2	15.1
<b>25-34 years</b>	39.1	10.6	6.4	48.5	14.4	8.7
<b>35-59 years</b>	18.7	4.3	2.4	26.6	4.2	2.5

**Table 7: Prevalence of specific illicit drug use in the last year, 2001-2005 NICS and 2003/04-2005/06 BCS**

	NICS (2001)	NICS (2003/04)	NICS (2005)	BCS (2003/04)	BCS (2004/05)	BCS (2005/06)
<b>Any Drug</b>	11.0	9.7	8.2	12.3	11.3	10.5
<b>Amphetamine</b>	1.2	0.9	1.0	1.5	1.4	1.3
<b>Cannabis</b>	7.3	6.4	5.8	10.8	9.7	8.7
<b>Cocaine</b>	0.5	1.1	1.0	2.4	2.0	2.4
<b>Crack</b>	0	0	*	0.2	0.1	0.2
<b>Ecstasy</b>	3.0	1.9	1.6	2.0	1.8	1.6
<b>Heroin</b>	0	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>LSD</b>	0.5	0	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.3
<b>Magic Mushrooms</b>	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.8	1.1	1.0
<b>Methadone</b>	0	0	*	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>Tranquilisers</b>	1.2	0.8	0.5	0.6	0.5	0.4
<b>Amyl Nitrate</b>	0.6	0.7	0.7	1.3	1.2	1.2
<b>Steroids</b>	0.3	0	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
<b>Glues</b>	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1

\* Less than 0.1%

**Table 8: Prevalence of illicit drug use by age and gender, 2001, 2003/04 and 2005 Northern Ireland Crime Surveys**

	All respondents (16 to 59 years old)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
<b>2005 NICS</b>						
Lifetime	26.2	32.0	21.0	35.9	39.1	18.7
Last year	8.2	12.4	4.5	18.8	10.6	4.3
Last month	4.9	7.5	2.5	11.3	6.4	2.4
<b>2003/04 NICS</b>						
Lifetime	27.4	31.6	23.7	40.1	43.1	17.8
Last year	9.7	11.5	8.1	24.0	13.7	3.9
Last month	6.2	7.4	5.1	16.2	8.7	2.2
<b>2001 NICS</b>						
Lifetime	26.0	30.6	22.3	42.9	35.4	16.4
Last year	11.0	14.2	8.4	28.1	13.2	4.3
Last month	6.8	9.7	4.3	19.3	4.3	2.2

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