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Statistics and Research Branch

Experience of Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey

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Introduction

This bulletin presents findings from a self-reporting module on drug misuse, contained within the 2003/04 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 to 59 years old.

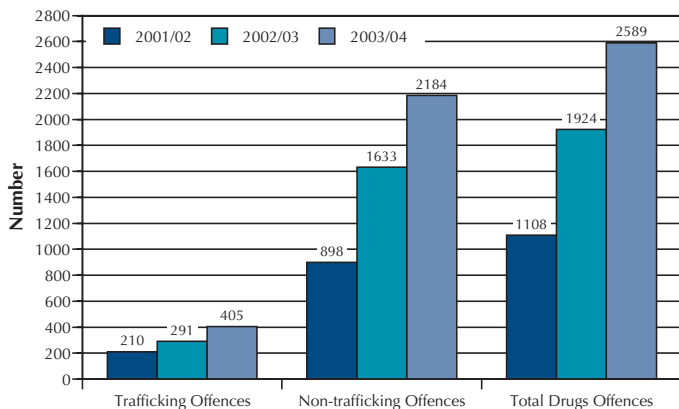
Key Findings

- ◆ 27% of Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) respondents reported having used at least one type of illicit drug at some time in their lives. 10% reported using at least one type of illicit drug in the twelve month period preceding the survey and 6% reported having used at least one illicit drug in the month preceding the survey. In comparison, 2003/04 British Crime Survey findings reported 36%, 12% and 8% for lifetime, last year and last month usage respectively (Table 4).
- ◆ Cannabis was the most commonly used drug across all three recall periods in the NICS. 20% of respondents claimed to have used it at some time in their lives, 6% had used in the last year and 4% had used it in the last month.
- ◆ NICS respondents aged 25-34 (43%) had the highest prevalence of lifetime usage. However, findings reveal that 16-24 year old respondents reported the highest prevalence in relation to last year (24%) and last month (16%) usage.
- ◆ Male respondents were significantly more likely than female respondents to have used an illicit drug in each of the three recall periods in the NICS. 32% of males and 24% of females had used at least one illicit drug in their lifetime; 12% of males and 8% of females had used an illicit drug in the last year; 7% of males and 5% of females had used an illicit drug in the last month.
- ◆ A comparative analysis of the 2003/04 NICS and the 2001 NICS indicated that the overall lifetime prevalence of any drug use had increased from 26% to 27%. However, the overall last year (10%, 2003/04; 11%, 2001) and overall last month (6%, 2003/04; 7%, 2001) prevalence rates had declined over the same period.

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

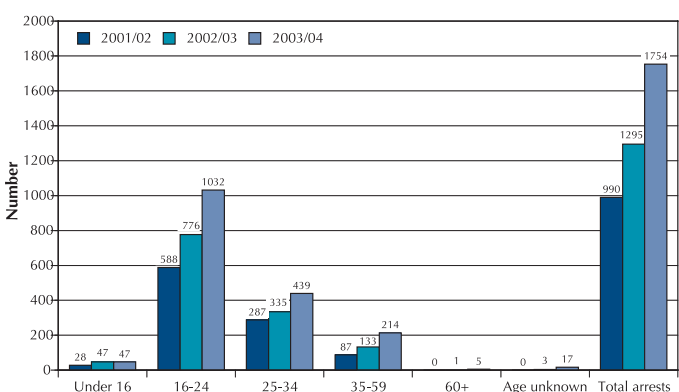
The number of drug offences recorded by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has increased in each of the last three years (Figure 1). There were a total of 2,589 offences recorded in 2003/04, a 35% increase on 2002/03 (1,924) and a 134% increase on 2001/02 (1,108). The ratio of non-trafficking to trafficking offences has remained similar over this three year period. In 2003/04, non-trafficking offences accounted for 84% of all recorded drug offences, compared with 85% in 2002/03 and 81% in 2001/02.

Figure 1: Number of drug offences recorded by the PSNI, 2001/02 to 2003/04



There were 1,754 drug-related arrests in Northern Ireland in 2003/04 (Figure 2). This is a 35% increase on the 2002/03 figure (1,295) and a 77% increase on the 2001/02 figure (990). The 16-24 year old age group made up the largest proportion of drug related arrests in each of the three years. This age group accounted for 59% (2003/04), 60% (2002/03) and 59% (2001/02) of all drug related arrests.

Figure 2: Drug related arrests in Northern Ireland by age group, 2001/02 to 2003/04



Statistics of the annual average prison population and annual number of receptions into prison show that in 2004, 7% (59) of the annual average population under sentence of immediate custody were convicted of ‘drug offences’. Six percent (76) of the total number of prisoner receptions in 2004 were for conviction of ‘drug offences’.

2. Northern Ireland Crime Survey (2003/04) - Lifetime Prevalence

More than one quarter (27%) of NICS respondents reported having used at least one type of illicit drug at some time in their lives (Table1).

Lifetime prevalence rates were highest amongst the younger age groups. Those aged 16-24 years and aged 25-34 years reported similar prevalence rates at 40% and 43% respectively. 18% of the 35-59 year old age group reported using illicit drugs in their lifetime.

Male respondents (32%) were significantly more likely than female respondents (24%) to have used at least one illicit drug at some time in their lives.

2.1 Drug Type

Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, with 20% of respondents claiming to have used it at some time. Usage was highest among 25-34 year olds (36%), though almost one in three (30%) 16-24 year olds reported lifetime use. Amphetamines (9%) were the second most commonly used drug, followed by ecstasy (7%). With regard to the other illicit drugs listed, reported lifetime usage was: amyl nitrate (5%), LSD (5%), magic mushrooms (4%), cocaine, solvents and tranquillisers (3% each), heroin, steroids and crack cocaine (1% each). Methadone was used by less than 0.5% of respondents.

2.2 Age

Although lifetime prevalence rates for different drugs varied with age, respondents aged 25-34 had the highest levels of usage for eleven of the thirteen drugs listed. Lifetime use of steroids and solvents was highest among 16-24 year olds.

2.3 Gender

Cannabis had the highest reported usage among both males (25%) and females (16%). Males reported higher lifetime prevalence than females of use of most illicit drugs. The prevalence of cocaine, LSD, amyl nitrate and solvents was twice as high among males as females. Only tranquillisers (3%), crack (1%) and methadone (less than 0.5%) had similar levels of reported lifetime use among males and females.

3. Northern Ireland Crime Survey (2003/04) - Last Year Prevalence

Ten percent of NICS respondents had reported using at least one type of illicit drug in the twelve month period preceding the survey (Table 2). Use in the last year provides a more accurate indicator of current trends of drug use compared with lifetime use statistics.

3.1 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, amphetamines, tranquilisers and amyl nitrate (all 1% each). The other illicit drugs were used by less than one percent of respondents or not at all.

3.2 Age

Almost one in four (24%) respondents aged 16–24 years had used at least one type of illicit drug in the past year. This compares with 14% of 25–34 year olds and 4% of 35–59 year olds. Cannabis (19%) and ecstasy (7%) use is substantially higher amongst the 16-24 year old group than any of the other age groups. Cocaine use is similar among the 16-24 year old and 25-34 year old age groups at 3% each.

3.3 Gender

Males (12%) were significantly more likely than females (8%) to have used at least one illicit drug in the last year. Amphetamine use is almost exclusively male (2%) – less than 0.5 % of females used it in the last year.

4. Northern Ireland Crime Survey (2003/04) - Last Month Prevalence

Six percent of respondents reported having used at least one illicit drug in the month preceding the survey (Table 3).

4.1 Drug Type

Cannabis (4%) was the most commonly used drug in the month preceding the survey, followed by ecstasy (1%) and cocaine (1%). No respondents admitted to having used crack, heroin, methadone or steroids during that same time period.

4.2 Age

In the month prior to the survey, 16% of 16–24 year olds had used an illicit drug. This compared with 9% of 25–34 year olds and 2% of 35–59 year olds. Cannabis (12%) and ecstasy (4%) use was substantially higher amongst 16-24 year olds than in any other age group. Prevalence of cocaine use was similar among 16-24 year olds (2%) and 25-34 year olds (2%).

4.3 Gender

Males (7%) were significantly more likely than females (5%) to have used an illicit drug in the last month. Prevalence of ecstasy use was similar for both males and females at 1%.

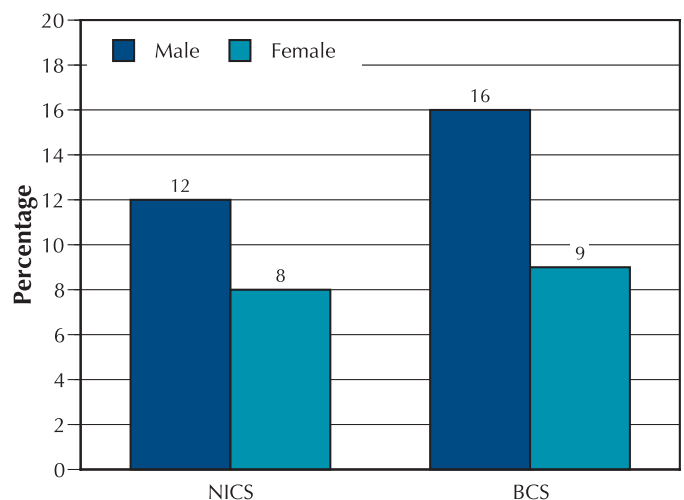
5. Comparisons between 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey and 2003/04 British Crime Survey findings

A comparative analysis of the 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey and 2003/04 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 lifetime (27%), last year (10%) and last month (6%) prevalence was lower than the corresponding rates in the BCS findings, at 36%, 12% and 8% respectively (Table 4).

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; 16% BCS) were more likely than females (8%, NICS; 9%, BCS) to have used an illicit drug (Figure 5). Likewise, prevalence of any drug use was highest among 16-24 year olds (24%, NICS; 28%, BCS).

Figure 5: Prevalence of drug use in the last year by gender, NICS and BCS 2003/04



Turning to use of specific illicit drugs during the past year, cannabis (6%, NICS; 11%, BCS) had the highest prevalence in both surveys. Prevalence of ecstasy (2%, NICS; 2%, BCS) use was similar in both jurisdictions. Amphetamine (1%, NICS; 2%, BCS) and cocaine (1%, NICS; 2%, BCS) use in the last year was twice the rate in England and Wales as in Northern Ireland (Table 5).

6. Comparisons between 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey and 2001 Northern Ireland Crime Survey

A comparative analysis of the 2003/04 NICS and the 2001 NICS indicated that the overall lifetime prevalence of any drug use had increased from 26% to 27%. However, the overall last year (10%, 2003/04; 11%, 2001) and overall last month (6%, 2003/04; 7%, 2001) prevalence rates had declined over the same period (Table 6).

Analysis of any drug use during the last year indicated that prevalence of any drug use was highest amongst 16-24 year olds (24%, 2003/04; 28%, 2001) in both surveys. However, it should be noted that prevalence among this age group declined between 2001 and 2003/04. This compares with the 25-34 year old age group, whose prevalence increased between 2001 (13%) and 2003/04 (14%). The 35-59 year old age group remained unchanged at 4%.

Analysis of specific drugs used in the last year indicates that cannabis (6%, 2003/04; 7%, 2001) continues to have the highest reported usage. Ecstasy (2%, 2003/04; 3%, 2001) is reported as the second most commonly used drug in both surveys (Table 7).

TECHNICAL NOTES

Sampling and fieldwork for the NICS

The initial sample consisted of 4,983 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 4,412 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 seven month period, from late August 2003 to early April 2004. During this time, 3,104 people aged 16 years and over completed interviews. Of these, 2,211 respondents were aged between 16 to 59 years. 88 of the respondents aged 16 to 59 refused to participate in the self completion drugs module and a further two were discounted for methodological reasons, giving a final sample size of 2,121. This represents an eligible response rate of 95.9%.

Table 1: 2003/04 NICS self-completion drugs module sample profile

Gender	Male	957
	Female	1,164
Age group	16-24	286
	25-34	531
	35-59	1,304
Region*	Belfast	333
	East NI	1,080
	West NI	703

*Excludes 5 missing values.

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 2003/04 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.

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.

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Table 1: 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey - Lifetime prevalence

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	27.4	31.6	23.7	40.1	43.1	17.8
Amphetamine	8.5	10.4	6.7	14.1	17.2	3.4
Cannabis	19.9	24.7	15.6	30.0	35.6	10.9
Cocaine	3.3	4.4	2.3	5.4	6.3	1.5
Crack	0.8	1.0	0.6	0.7	1.8	0.4
Ecstasy	7.0	8.1	6.0	15.0	16.2	1.1
Heroin	0.6	0.9	0.3	0.7	1.2	0.4
LSD	4.7	6.5	3.1	4.9	13.0	1.4
Magic Mushrooms	4.4	7.1	2.0	4.2	8.1	3.0
Methadone	0.2	0.3	0.2	0	0.2	0.4
Tranquilisers	3.0	2.8	3.2	3.2	4.0	2.6
Amyl Nitrate	4.8	6.7	3.1	7.9	11.5	1.3
Steroids	0.5	0.8	0.2	1.2	0.6	0.3
Glue	3.0	4.1	1.9	7.9	4.7	0.8

Table 2: 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey – Last year prevalence

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	9.7	11.5	8.1	24.0	13.7	3.9
Amphetamine	0.9	1.6	0.3	1.7	2.4	0.1
Cannabis	6.4	8.2	4.9	18.6	9.9	1.4
Cocaine	1.1	1.5	0.7	2.5	2.6	0
Crack	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ecstasy	1.9	2.2	1.7	7.1	2.4	0.1
Heroin	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.2	0
LSD	0	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
Magic Mushrooms	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.7	0.2	0
Methadone	0	0	0.1	0	0	0
Tranquilisers	0.8	0.7	0.8	2	1.0	0.4
Amyl Nitrate	0.7	0.8	0.5	2.5	0.8	0.1
Steroids	0	0	0.1	0	0	0
Glue	0.2	0.2	0.3	1.0	0	0

Table 3: 2003/04 Northern Ireland Crime Survey – Last month prevalence

	All adults (16-59)	Males	Females	16-24	25-34	35-59
Any Drug	6.2	7.4	5.1	16.2	8.7	2.2
Amphetamine	0.2	0.5	0.1	1.0	0.2	0.1
Cannabis	4.0	5.5	2.6	11.9	6.3	0.8
Cocaine	0.6	0.9	0.3	1.5	1.6	0
Crack	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ecstasy	1.1	0.9	1.2	4.2	1.2	0.1
Heroin	0	0.1	0	0	0.2	0
LSD	0	0	0	0	0	0
Magic Mushrooms	0.1	0	0.2	0.5	0	0
Methadone	0	0	0.1	0	0	0.1
Tranquilisers	0.4	0.5	0.4	1.2	0.6	0.1
Amyl Nitrate	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.2	0
Steroids	0	0	0	0	0	0
Glue	0.1	0	0.3	0.5	0	0.1

Table 4: Prevalence of illicit drug use by age - 2003/04 NICS and 2003/04 BCS

	NICS			BCS		
	Lifetime	Last year	Last month	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
All respondents	27.4	9.7	6.2	35.6	12.3	7.5
16-24 years	40.1	24.0	16.2	46.6	27.8	17.3
25-34 years	43.1	13.7	8.7	48.9	16.8	10.6
35-59 years	17.8	3.9	2.2	26.6	5.4	3.1

Table 5: Prevalence of use of specific drugs in the last year - 2003/04 NICS and 2003/04 BCS

	NICS	BCS
Any Drug	9.7	12.3
Amphetamine	0.9	1.5
Cannabis	6.4	10.8
Cocaine	1.1	2.4
Crack	0	0.2
Ecstasy	1.9	2.0
Heroin	0.1	0.1
LSD	0	0.2
Magic Mushrooms	0.2	0.8
Methadone	0	0.1
Tranquilisers	0.8	0.6
Amyl Nitrate	0.7	1.3
Steroids	0	0.1
Glue	0.2	0.1

Table 6: Prevalence of illicit drug use by age and gender - 2003/04 NICS and 2001 NICS

	2003/04 NICS			2001 NICS		
	Lifetime	Last year	Last month	Lifetime	Last year	Last month
All respondents	27.4	9.7	6.2	26.0	11.0	6.8
Males	31.6	11.5	7.4	30.6	14.2	9.7
Females	23.7	8.1	5.1	22.3	8.4	4.3
16-24 years	40.1	24.0	16.2	42.9	28.1	19.3
25-34 years	43.1	13.7	8.7	35.4	13.2	7.5
35-59 years	17.8	3.9	2.2	16.4	4.3	2.2

Table 7: Prevalence of use of specific drugs in the last year - 2003/04 NICS and 2001 NICS

	2003/04	2001
Any Drug	9.7	11.0
Amphetamine	0.9	1.2
Cannabis	6.4	7.3
Cocaine	1.1	0.5
Crack	0	0
Ecstasy	1.9	3.0
Heroin	0.1	0
LSD	0	0.5
Magic Mushrooms	0.2	0.5
Methadone	0	0
Tranquilisers	0.8	1.2
Amyl Nitrate	0.7	0.6
Steroids	0	0.3
Glue	0.2	0.4

NOTES

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