

TOBACCO, ALCOHOL, AND DRUG MISUSE IN TWO GARDA DIVISIONS

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The extent of tobacco, alcohol, and drug misuse among second-level students in the Kerry and Waterford/Kilkenny Garda Divisions was assessed in a 65-item self-report questionnaire administered in a classroom setting to 3,094 5th (pre-leaving certificate) Year and 2nd Year students attending 31 schools. Results were largely in line with the findings of similar research conducted in other administrative regions. Almost one-quarter (24%) of respondents had smoked cigarettes at least once a week in the 30 days preceding administration of the questionnaire and 32% had been drunk during that period. Over a quarter (28%) reported that they had wanted to take drugs at some stage in the past, and 23% had actually done so. Curiosity (63%), the induced 'high' (28%), and a desire to forget personal problems (10%) were the main motivations behind first-time drug use.

The prevalence of tobacco, alcohol, and drug (TAD) misuse by Irish teenagers and young adults is of serious concern for those in the health, education, and policing sectors. A plethora of national and regional studies indicate that TAD misuse levels are high among Irish second-level students, and international research suggests that these levels are higher than the European average (Hibell et al, 1997; Hibell et al, 2001). Studies reveal that in excess of 55% of respondents had smoked cigarettes at some stage in their lives, between 50 and 70% had consumed an alcoholic drink, and between 11 and 25% had taken drugs (see, in particular, Grube & Morgan, 1986; Grube & Morgan, 1990; Heywood, 1996; Jackson, 1997; Mid-Western Health Board, 1998; Morgan & Grube, 1994).

Given the ever-changing nature of substance abuse and changes in trends in alcohol and tobacco consumption by teenagers, there is a continuing need for timely data to inform policy setting and strategy implementation. This is particularly true of those whose task it is to deal with countering misuse on a regional or community level, and who require local information to generate an accurate representation of the extent of the problems they face. Unfortunately, national and international research findings used in informing decisions at government level are often of questionable value in this context (see EMCDDA, 2002; Gruenwald, Treno, Taff, & Klitzner, 1997; Hallfors & Iritani, 2002). The

study described in this paper examined levels of tobacco, alcohol, and drug misuse by second-level students at regional level (in Kerry and Waterford/Kilkenny Garda Divisions). It forms part of a larger study (Sarma, Walker, & Ryan, 2002), and builds on similar research conducted in Tipperary Division (Heywood, 1996).

METHOD

Participants

Schools selected for participation in the research were drawn from a list of all second-level schools in the Waterford/Kilkenny and Kerry Divisions provided by the Department of Education and Science. Demographic information relating to the numbers of males and females in each division attending each type of school (secondary, vocational, and comprehensive) was obtained. The population of schools was stratified by gender and school type, and schools were selected at random (using a table of random numbers) within each stratum for participation in the study. Within selected schools, all students in 2nd and 5th Years (pre-Leaving Certificate) were selected for participation. The demographic breakdown of the target population and sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Gender and School-Type Profile of Target Population and Sample

	Population				Sample			
	Waterford/ Kilkenny		Kerry		Waterford/ Kilkenny		Kerry	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Female	8,321	53.5	5,832	51.6	865	50.4	582	44.0
Male	7,234	46.5	5,458	48.3	850	49.6	741	56.0
Total	15,555		11,290		1,715		1,323	
Comprehensive	467	3.0	1,104	9.8	300	17.5	449	33.9
Secondary	9,955	64.0	7,073	62.6	925	53.9	467	35.2
Vocational	5,133	33.0	3,113	27.6	490	28.6	409	30.9
Total	15,555		11,290		1,715		1,325	

A total of 3,094 students in 31 schools participated in the survey. Following internal consistency assessments detailed later, 54 of this original sample were identified as having presented unreliable information and were eliminated from further analysis resulting in a final sample of 3,040 in which 1,591 were male and

1,447 female. (Two respondents did not record their gender.) There were 1,618 students in the 2nd year sample and 1,381 in the 5th year sample. (Forty-one students did not submit responses.)

Instrument

A questionnaire used by Heywood (1996) in similar research conducted in Tipperary Garda Division and by the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (1999) was adapted to take into account more recent patterns in alcohol and drug misuse. Sixty-five questions were posed which sought information from respondents on cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, drug use, and general background.

Before proceeding with analysis, respondents who reported use or purchase of 'relevis' were removed. 'Relevis', a substance that does not actually exist, had been included in a list of drugs to identify students who over-stated their involvement in substance abuse.

Since the sample did not accurately reflect the population in terms of gender and school type (secondary, vocational, comprehensive), a weighting procedure was applied in estimating values for these categories.

RESULTS

Table 2 contains results for TAD misuse, by Garda Division, gender, and school grade. Based on data from the full sample (column 2), more than 1 in 5 had smoked at least once a week (24%) during the 30 days preceding the survey, been drunk during that period (32%), and taken drugs at some stage in their lives (23%). In line with findings from similar surveys, cannabis (18%) was the substance most likely to have been used. Fewer respondents reported experience of LSD (1.6%) or ecstasy (2.5%). Many had been offered drugs (42%) in the past, and 28% stated that they had 'ever wanted to try' drugs.

Of those who admitted drug misuse, a majority (63%) reported that they were motivated out of curiosity. More females (76%) than males (52%) expressed this view. The induced 'high' (28%) and a desire to forget personal problems (10%) were other motivating forces.

The vast majority (84%) of those who had experience with drug-taking stated that they had received their first drug from a friend. When asked to identify the environment in which drugs were taken on the last occasion, public areas (43%), residential homes (35%), and 'discos' (10%) emerged as important locations. For those who had consumed alcohol in the past, 30% obtained it from a public house or disco, with friends (29%) and the family home (27%) other prominent

sources. A quarter said that they had never received drugs-related information in school.

Table 2
Percentages of Respondents Reporting TAD-Related Activities, by Garda Division, Gender, and School Grade

Activity and attitudes	Full Sample	Kerry	Waterford/ Kilkenny	Male	Female	2nd Year	5th Year
Smoke at least once a week	24	19	26	22	25	18	32
Drunk in last 30 days	32	29	35	31	34	23	52
Have taken drugs	23	18	27	25	21	15	32
Have taken cannabis	18	13	22	20	16	10	27
Have taken LSD	1.6	0.7	2.2	1.6	1.5	.4	3
Have taken ecstasy	2.5	1.4	3.3	2.2	2.8	1	4
Have 'ever wanted to try drugs'	28	27	30	29	28	21	37
Have been offered drugs	42	37	46	44	40	29	57

There were significant differences in levels of TAD misuse between the Garda Divisions. For each of the items presented in Table 2, higher levels of TAD activity were reported by the Waterford/Kilkenny sample, most markedly for levels of smoking, general drug use, and cannabis use. It is likely that these differences are at least partly due to the fact that a higher proportion of the population in the Waterford/Kilkenny division live in urban areas.

Females were more likely than males to have smoked at least one cigarette a week and to have been drunk in the preceding 30 days. Conversely, a higher percentage of males (25) than of females (21) reported having taken drugs. Males were also more likely to have been offered drugs.

Almost one-third (32%) of 5th Year students had smoked at least one cigarette a week in the previous 30 days and 52% had been drunk during that period. Thirty-two percent had tried drugs, more than half (57%) had been offered drugs, and 37% stated that they had 'ever wanted to try' drugs. Twenty-seven percent had taken cannabis, 3% LSD, and 4% ecstasy.

The levels of misuse by 2nd Year students were much lower, though still of concern. More than 1 in 5 (21%) had wanted to take drugs in the past, and 15% had actually done so. Levels of drunkenness (23%) and smoking (18%) in the month prior to the surveys are also cause for concern.

CONCLUSION

Much has been written about the difficulties encountered in conducting research on sensitive topics (see e.g., Lee & Renzetti, 1993). Given the sensitive nature of the disclosures in the current study, under-reporting is likely to have occurred, in which case results would represent the lower end of misuse levels.

Evidence of under-reporting emerged in response to a question that asked, 'If you had ever used cannabis do you think you would have said so in this questionnaire?'. Fifteen percent stated that they would not. Thus for cannabis use, the true representation is likely to fall between the reported percentage level and that level increased by 15 percent.

The extent to which under-reporting was a consequence of police involvement in the research is unclear. Unfortunately, the issue is largely unaddressed in similar research and thus it is difficult to identify 'normal' levels of under-reporting. One must assume however, that to some extent at least, and despite reassurances that responses were confidential and anonymous, subjects may have been reluctant to admit to illegal behaviour given the role of the Garda Síochána in the survey.

The Mid-Western Health Board (1998) identified a number of additional methodological problems in research of this nature, suggesting that in addition to under-reporting, some students may actually over-report their involvement in TAD misuse. As with many similar surveys, the survey instrument employed in our study incorporated a 'dummy drug' ('relevin') that facilitated identification of a significant number of over-raters who were subsequently excluded from analysis. Despite this measure, it is possible that over-reporting was still present in the data.

Two additional comments made in the Mid-Western Health Board (1998) study are of greater relevance to our study. As with their survey, there may have been an under-representation of school truants. Another high-risk group, early school leavers, obviously were not represented.

Differences in sample and questionnaire design make it difficult to make comparisons with similar research with any great degree of confidence. Generally speaking however, and as illustrated in Table 3, our findings are largely in line with results from similar surveys administered to second-level students in Clare, Limerick County, Limerick City, and Tipperary (Heywood, 1996; Mid-Western Health Board, 1998). The high levels of misuse reported in Waterford/Kilkenny Division are comparable with those reported for Limerick City and those for Kerry are in line with data for Limerick County and Clare.

Table 3
Percentages of Respondents Reporting TAD-Related Activities and Attitudes in Three Studies

Activity	Current Study			Heywood (1996)	Mid-Western Health Board (1998)		
	Waterford/ Kilkenny	Kerry	Combined	Tipperary	Limerick City	Limerick County	Clare
Have smoked	58	60	59	69	58	50	62
Regular/current smokers ¹	26	19	24	35	29	26	34
Have drunk alcohol	79	75	77	80	85	72	77
Drank in last month	57	53	55	NA	NA	NA	NA
Are drinkers	NA	NA	NA	NA	71	57	66
Have taken drugs	27	18	23	28	33	19	29
Have taken cannabis	22	13	18	16	22	5	17

¹ The Mid-Western Health Board survey provided data for the percentage of post-primary students who were 'smokers' at the time of the survey. For the present research, and that of Heywood, regular smokers were deemed to be those who smoked more than one cigarette per week.

A number of recommendations and observations may be made on the basis of the findings of our study. First, some consideration should be given to additional research that would measure the extent of misuse within each administrative (county) area. Since misuse differs between locations, such research would allow national strategies to be modified to suit the needs of specific communities.

While the importance of drugs- and alcohol-related education is widely accepted, it is of some concern that so few students in the present study reported that they had received information either in school or at home. The dangers of alcohol and drug dependence need to be impressed on students and misuse demystified in order to promote positive attitudes and decrease the number of those who 'ever wanted to try drugs,' currently 28% in the two divisions surveyed.

Since residential homes, public houses, and public areas are associated with substance misuse by teenagers, those tasked with monitoring behaviour, such as the Garda Síochána, publicans, parents, and other supervisors, need to remain vigilant. Where necessary, awareness of the importance of monitoring and controlling access should be promoted.

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