

# **ESPAD 2007: Results for Ireland**

MARCH 2009

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND CHILDREN

**The authors of this report are:**

Mark Morgan and Kate Brand, St. Patrick's College, Dublin ([www.spd.dcu.ie](http://www.spd.dcu.ie))

Copyright © Minister for Health and Children, 2009

Department of Health and Children  
Hawkins House  
Hawkins Street  
Dublin 2  
Tel: +353 (0)1 635 4000  
Fax: +353 (0)1 635 4001  
E-mail: [dohc@health.gov.ie](mailto:dohc@health.gov.ie)  
Web: [www.dohc.gov.ie](http://www.dohc.gov.ie)

Published by The Stationery Office, Dublin

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission in writing of the copyright holder.*

For rights of translation or reproduction, applications should be made to the Head of Communications, Department of Health and Children, Hawkins House, Hawkins Street, Dublin 2, Ireland

# ESPAD 2007: Executive Summary

## Overview

This report is based on the 2007 European Schools Project for Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) Survey carried out in Ireland.

The ESPAD survey takes place every 4 years in almost all European countries during the same time period and is based on a common set of questions and methodology. This series of studies began in 1995 following an initiative by the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN) to connect with researchers in other European countries, including Ireland, with a view to conducting a common survey on the usage of tobacco, alcohol and illegal drugs in the school-going population.

The most important goal of the ESPAD survey is to monitor trends in alcohol and other drug use among 15-16 year-olds and to compare trends between countries and groups of countries. This information is essential in planning future prevention initiatives. The rationale for school surveys is that students make up the age groups when onset of use is most likely to occur. While school-going populations are relatively accessible, it should be noted that young people who have left school may differ in important respects from those who complete the senior cycle.

## ESPAD Questionnaire

Ireland has participated in every phase of data collection since the launch of ESPAD in 1995. In the current phase, 2,249 students from a sample of 94 randomly selected post-primary schools participated in the 2007 study. The vast majority of the questions in the ESPAD questionnaire are agreed at international level. In addition, some questions specific to Ireland were included by the Irish Advisory Group, such as items relating to long-term disability and the places where alcohol and cigarettes were purchased.

A main part of the questionnaire concerns **cigarette smoking**, including lifetime smoking and the number of times respondents smoked in the last month, as well as how many cigarettes were smoked on those days when respondents reported smoking. Other questions concern ease of access to cigarettes and where these were obtained on the last occasion by those respondents who smoked.

The next set of questions focuses on **alcohol**, including the number of times of drinking over the lifetime, last year and last month. Other questions focus on the respondent's age of first drinking experience, as well as the particular alcoholic beverages consumed over the last month. A number of questions focus on the last occasion that the respondent consumed alcohol, including the amount drunk, where the alcohol was obtained and the extent to which he or she felt drunk on this occasion. Other questions concern the number of times of 'feeling drunk' (lifetime, last year, last month) and whether or not a range of

consequences was experienced due to alcohol consumption. Finally, respondents were asked where they consumed the alcohol on the last occasion they drank.

A series of questions specifically concerns the use of **cannabis**, including the number of times (if any) cannabis has been used, age of first use, ease of access to the substance, and occasions on which respondents had an opportunity to try the substance without actually doing so. A number of questions concern other **illegal drugs**, including ecstasy, cocaine and heroin, as well as **inhalants or solvents**. Respondents were asked about the number of times they had tried these substances (if at all) and the age at which they had first tried the substance in question. They were also asked whether they had experienced particular consequences of drug use; these included problems with parents and friends, as well as getting into fights or being hurt.

## Findings

### Cigarette smoking

The findings in relation to cigarette smoking suggest an overall decrease in the percentage of young people who smoke. Just over half of the respondents in ESPAD 2007 had smoked at some time and one-quarter had smoked during the previous month. Of those who had smoked, about half had their first cigarette during their primary school years (between the ages of 9 and 12). This finding is of some concern, particularly when we consider that the younger people are when they have their first cigarette, the more likely they are to continue smoking into adulthood. Experimentation with smoking is seen to continue up to the age of 15 and then appears to go into decline in the later teenage years. This gives a clear indication of the importance of targeting these age groups in particular when designing preventative programmes.

There were substantial gender differences, especially in the case of frequent smoking, with girls more likely to report smoking than boys. With regard to those who smoked on a daily basis, 16.7% of girls fell into this category compared to 10.7% of boys.

In addition to these overall findings, there has also been an increase in the percentage of young people who report to have 'never smoked' (52%) compared with previous surveys. The percentage of Irish students who have never tried a cigarette has almost doubled since 1995, when 26% of boys and girls reported never smoking. A significant increase (15%) in the number of students reporting never smoking was observed for Ireland in the 4 years since the last ESPAD survey (2003). While the percentages of adolescents who smoke may have declined, this seems not to be due to a perception by respondents that cigarettes are difficult to obtain; rather, the vast majority believe that it is easy to get cigarettes if they want them.

### Alcohol

In comparison with earlier Irish data for 2003, ESPAD 2007 shows some positive changes in drinking by adolescents. In the 2003 survey, 73% reported having drunk during the previous month compared with 58% in the present study. Adolescents report that alcohol is more difficult to obtain now than it was 12 years ago. However, there is still a major issue about drunkenness: over half the respondents (54%) in ESPAD 2007 reported being drunk at some time in their lives.

The vast majority (86%) of Irish students have experimented with alcohol by the age of 16. Almost one-quarter of adolescents have drunk alcohol 40 times or more in their lifetime. A majority (about three-quarters, but depending on the beverage in question) thought that it would be easy for them to obtain alcoholic beverages. A remarkably large percentage had tried alcohol in their primary school years (21% in the case of beer) and 7% of students indicated that they were drunk for the first time by the age of 12.

Irish girls are drinking almost as often as boys, and more girls (29%) than boys (25%) reported being drunk during the previous month. Girls showed a preference for alcopops, wine and spirits, whereas boys tended to drink beer and cider more often. Girls' preference for spirits is of particular concern and is a trend that has been observed in Ireland for the last 12 years. Almost the same percentage of boys (42%) and girls (44%) reported binge-drinking during the previous month. The tendency for boys and girls to binge-drink with equal regularity was also observed in 2003 and 1999, and reflects a narrowing of the gender gap in this aspect of drinking since 1995.

Over half of Irish adolescents (54%) had been drunk at least once by the age of 16 and 42.5% had engaged in binge-drinking during the previous month. Many reported having engaged in 'problem-drinking' and 'experiencing negative consequences of alcohol consumption'. The most frequently experienced drink-related problems were accidents/injuries (18%), getting into a fight (15%) and problems with parents (18%).

### **Illegal substances**

More than one in 5 of all respondents (20.3%) in ESPAD 2007 had tried cannabis, an illegal substance, at some stage in their lives. In addition, while cannabis is reported by students to be more difficult to obtain now than in the past, a sizeable 43% still believe that it is easy to get. Again, it should be noted that this is a reflection of the perception of the respondents – which has been shown in other research to be an important factor in frequency of use.

Many boys and girls begin using cannabis at an early age. Findings from ESPAD surveys over the last 12 years show that while the percentage of boys who report having used cannabis by the age of 13 or less has decreased (from 10% to 8%), there has been an increase in the number of girls who report using it (from 4% to 6%). Since early initiation is viewed as particularly dangerous (in terms of long-term problems with substance use), we should be concerned about these trends for girls in the Irish data.

Boys tended to report the heaviest consumption of cannabis in their lifetime, last year and last month. Just under 5% of boys said that they had used cannabis more than 10 times in the previous month. As this suggests that their use extends beyond the weekends, this finding may have important implications for these students' performance at school.

Just over 15% of respondents had tried inhalants or solvents at some time in their lives. Of these, nearly two-thirds had done so once or twice. A minority of just over 2% claimed to have used inhalants or solvents more than 10 times. With regard to ecstasy, just over 4% said they had used the substance at some time, with over half of these saying that they did so once or twice.

The results of ESPAD 2007 reveal that there has been a substantial drop in the use of inhalants or solvents over the last 8 years, from a lifetime prevalence rate of 22% to 15%. Of those who had tried inhalants or solvents, about one-third had done so at 12 years of age or younger, while there was a broader range in the age of first trying ecstasy. The vast majority of respondents (over 70%) took the view that it would be 'easy' or 'very easy' to get inhalants or solvents if they wanted to, while less than one-third thought it would be 'easy' or 'very easy' to get ecstasy.

### **Factors influencing substance use**

A number of conclusions emerge from ESPAD 2007 with regard to the factors that are important in substance use:

- Social background seems to have only a slight relationship with various forms of substance use; children whose parents have lower levels of education were somewhat more likely to experiment with various substances.
- As other research has frequently found, substance use by friends is a major predictor of alcohol and illegal drug use, but not of cigarette smoking. However, use by friends has been found not simply to be a causal influence, but also to reflect the tendency for young people with similar interests to support each other.
- The frequency and amount of substance use is only weakly related to the perception by users of the dangers and consequences of substance use. In other words, realising the dangers of using a particular substance is not a major influence on the likelihood of using it – a finding that has important consequences for prevention programmes. On the other hand, there is a strong relationship with believing that there will be 'positive' short-term outcomes from using substances, like 'feeling relaxed' and 'forgetting troubles'.
- Satisfaction with life is negatively related to substance use, i.e. those young people who are dissatisfied with their lives are more likely to use various substances.

### **Sources and locations for consumption**

ESPAD 2007 provides worthwhile data on how alcohol is purchased and also the location where drinking takes place. Respondents reported that the single most common way of obtaining alcohol was to have friends or siblings buy it on their behalf. With regard to location, the most popular venue for drinking was either in their own home or at a friend's house. It is also worth noting that an 'uncontrolled' setting (e.g. street corner, town park) was also a popular location for the consumption of alcohol.

The survey also provides information on the sources of getting cigarettes. The most popular way was through friends. It is also of interest that a significant minority said that they bought cigarettes in a shop or similar location; getting cigarettes from a vending machine was not a substantial category.

### **Parents' influence and leisure activities**

A number of important findings emerge from ESPAD 2007 on parenting. The perception by respondents that parents set definite rules is not an important influence. However, parental monitoring (or rather children's perception of parental monitoring) is a major factor in preventing substance misuse – young people are very aware of their parents

'keeping an eye' on their activities. The indications are that emotional support and care from parents are moderately related to substance use; they are more important than the setting of rules, but are less influential than the perception of parental monitoring.

Findings show that the majority of respondents spend a lot of their leisure time both on the Internet and in sporting activities (about four-fifths on a weekly basis or more often). A relatively smaller number of young people (under 33%) read books on a regular basis and less than one-fifth (20%) are involved in an organised youth club. A large number of young people spend a lot of time watching TV or DVDs: over two-fifths said that they spend 3 hours or more on an average weekday doing this.

Overall, the study found that the relationship between substance use and leisure activities is extremely modest for all the activities explored here and suggests that it is unlikely that the lack of suitable alternative leisure activities is a major influence on substance misuse.

### **School influences**

A complex pattern emerges on the findings relating to school influences. Involvement and satisfaction in school is very weakly related to substance misuse; in fact, the patterns suggest that the effects of involvement with school are somewhat stronger in the case of legal substances (e.g. alcohol) than illegal ones. Generally, the study's respondents expressed satisfaction with the way in which schools prepare them for pressures to experiment with substances and to make them aware of issues surrounding their use. While a survey approach such as this cannot measure effectiveness, these are important findings on the perception by students of such educational programmes by schools.

### **International comparisons**

Compared to the other European countries in ESPAD, Irish students in 2007 are about as likely to drink alcohol as the average in other countries. However, a major difference emerges in relation to being drunk: Irish students report being drunk more often than in most other countries (26% in the last month compared to a European average of 18%). As regards perceived availability of alcohol, Irish students are about average in terms of the percentage who think that particular kinds of alcoholic drinks are easy to obtain (78% in the case of beer, which is also the European average). Compared to other countries, Irish students indicate that alcohol is more likely to result in positive consequences, like 'feeling relaxed' and 'forgetting troubles'.

Somewhat fewer Irish students indicate that they smoke cigarettes than in many other countries. Specifically, 23% of Irish students report that they had smoked in the last month compared to a European average of 29%. There are major differences between boys and girls in Ireland (with girls smoking more frequently) and while this is similar to the UK, the gender difference is reversed in some countries in Eastern Europe.

The percentage of cannabis use in Ireland is about the same as the European average (lifetime use of cannabis is 20% for Ireland compared to a European average of 19%). Similarly, the opportunities to use cannabis for students who had not done so are roughly the same for Ireland as for other countries (about 33%).

The use of inhalants or solvents is higher in Ireland (15%) than in most European countries (9% for all countries combined). This percentage should be taken in the context of the drop in reported inhalant use that was evident in the Irish 2007 data.

Finally, use of tranquillizers or sedatives without a doctor's prescription is relatively low in Ireland (3%) compared to all other countries combined (6%).

## **Summary**

There are some positive indications in the results of ESPAD 2007, as well as some reasons for continued concern. In summary:

- Both in terms of international comparisons and relative to phases of the survey in earlier years, cigarette smoking has fallen substantially. However, this is more the case with boys and a substantial minority still begin smoking at a very young age.
- While there has been an overall fall in alcohol consumption, with Irish adolescents at the European average, there is still a problem with the number who report being drunk.
- The use of inhalants or solvents, while high by international standards, has fallen over the last decade.
- The percentage of cannabis use in Ireland is about the same as the European average.