

Drug-related Deaths in Northern Ireland: Socio-Demographic Analyses

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Date: March 2020

Northern Ireland has observed a considerable rise in drug-related deaths in the last two decades, reaching a record high of 189 deaths in 2018, according to latest official statistics. This is despite increased awareness of the harmful consequences of drugs. Drug misuse is an important, yet inadequately understood, public health problem in Northern Ireland, that can have tragic consequences for families and communities and creates a wider societal cost in terms of premature mortality.

What we are doing

The overarching goal of the research is to advance understanding of the nature and scale of drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland. We are using a research dataset called the Northern Ireland Mortality Study (NIMS) linking the 2011 Census to subsequent deaths until 2017 to provide novel, socio-demographic insights into drug-related deaths in Northern Ireland.

Key Aims

For drug deaths in Northern Ireland we are:

1. Examining recent trends;
2. Assessing the socio-demographic profile; and
3. Modelling associations of health, socio-demographic and local area characteristics.

Why it matters

Northern Ireland is experiencing a growing problem of drug misuse evidenced by increases in drug-related deaths in recent years. However, as drug users are a hard-to-reach group and often don't avail of existing services, relatively little is known about their socio-economic characteristics and underlying health issues. Policy makers within the health sphere are very keen to have a greater understanding of the social determinants of drug-related deaths to build on existing preventative efforts, harm reduction programmes and early intervention efforts. Research findings will help inform local stakeholder initiatives as well as the cross-sectoral strategy 'the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs'. The research is in step with the overarching objective of the Programme for Government in Northern Ireland of improving wellbeing for all by tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth.

What next?

We are continuing to work with policy stakeholders, including the Public Health Agency and Department of Health, to ensure the research addresses as many policy relevant questions as possible. The findings from the study will be published on 24th March 2020 via the NISRA website. A separate but similar analysis relating to alcohol related deaths in Northern Ireland is currently underway and will be published in Spring 2020.