

STATISTICS PRESS NOTICE – DRUG-RELATED AND DRUG- MISUSE DEATHS REGISTERED IN NORTHERN IRELAND (2010- 2020)



9:30am Tuesday 1 March 2022

Deaths due to drug-related causes 2010 - 2020

There were 218 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2020. Over half (55.5%) of these deaths were of men aged 25-44. These are some of the findings of the statistics published today by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

The 2020 total (218) is an increase from 191 in 2019 and more than double that recorded a decade ago (92). The number of drug-misuse deaths increased from 165 in 2019 to 182 in 2020 and have almost tripled from 64 such deaths registered in 2010. In terms of all deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2020 (17,614), drug-related deaths accounted for 1.2% of the total.

The figures show that the age-standardised drug-related mortality rate increased between 2019 and 2020 for both males and females. The rate for males increased from 14.5 per 100,000 males to 16.7; for females the equivalent rate rose from 6.2 per 100,000 females to 7.0. Males accounted for 70.2% (153) of the 218 drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland in 2020.

Of the 218 drug-related deaths in 2020, 67 (30.7%) were in the 25-34 age group with a further 54 (24.8%) in the 35-44 age group. These figures equate to age-specific, drug-related mortality rates of 27.2 deaths per 100,000 people, aged 25-34 and 22.3 deaths per 100,000 people, aged 35-44.

The majority (82.6%) of all drug-related deaths in 2020 were also classed as drug misuse deaths (where the underlying cause is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence or where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved), a decrease from 86.4% in 2019. This is due to a higher number of death certificates in 2020 citing 'multi-drug toxicity' without the detail of specific drugs. The age-standardised rate of deaths relating to drug misuse has increased from 3.5 deaths per 100,000 people in 2010 to 9.8 deaths per 100,000 people in 2020.

Two-thirds (66.1%) of drug-related deaths in 2020 involved two or more drugs. In contrast, in 2010 55.4% of drug-related deaths involved two or more drugs.

Since 2010, over half of drug-related deaths each year have involved an opioid. In 2020, 133 drug-related deaths had an opioid mentioned on the death certificate. Taken as a proportion of all drug-related deaths, this is a decrease from 67.0% in 2019 to 61.0% in 2020. Heroin and morphine were the most frequently mentioned opioids in 2020, connected to 55 drug-related deaths, up from 46 in 2019 and the highest number on record.

Diazepam was involved in 23.4% of all drug-related deaths in 2020, a notable decrease from previous years. Drug-related deaths involving pregabalin have risen consistently since its first appearance in these statistics in 2013. The annual number of deaths involving this controlled substance rose from 9 in 2016, to a peak of 77 in 2019, but reduced slightly to 70 in 2020.

The number of drug-related deaths involving cocaine has remained relatively unchanged since 2019 (36 in 2020), however the proportion of deaths where it is mentioned on the death certificate has decreased from a high of 19.4% in 2019, to 16.5% in 2020.

The number of drug-related deaths registered which involved a psychoactive substance (**that is all substances that have been controlled under the Psychoactive Substance Act 2016 – this includes drugs that may also have since been classed under the Drug Misuse Act**) increased from 11 in 2019 to 51 in 2020. Further analysis showed that 2 specific drugs have driven this increase: flualpazolam and etizolam.

The proportion of all drug-related deaths that also mentioned alcohol on the death certificate decreased from 16.2% in 2010 to 14.7% in 2020. This is less than half of the proportion seen in 2012 when the series peaked at 31.8% of drug-related deaths mentioning alcohol on the death certificate.

The statistics also indicate that there are notably higher numbers of drug-related deaths in areas of deprivation across Northern Ireland. People living in the most deprived areas are almost five times more likely to die from a drug-related death than those in the least deprived areas.

NISRA

March 2022

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. Statistics on drug-related deaths registered in Northern Ireland can be found at: [Drug Related Deaths](#)
2. Statistics on alcohol-specific deaths in Northern Ireland were published in February 2021 and can be found at:
[Alcohol Specific Deaths](#)
3. Drug-related deaths are defined when the underlying cause of death recorded on the death certificate is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence. Drug-misuse deaths occur where the underlying cause is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence or where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved. Further information can be found at:
[Drug Related Deaths in Northern Ireland Information Paper](#)

4. It should be noted that this release include a minor change to the definition of drug-misuse deaths to bring it in line with England and Wales making the information fully comparable. There was minimal impact the numbers and no change to the trend as a result. More detail is available from the [Drug-Related deaths: information paper](#).

5. Information on the areas of deprivation is taken from the Northern Ireland Multiple deprivation measures (NIMDM 2017) and can be found at:

[Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2017](#)

6. All media queries to Department of Finance Press Office at dof.pressoffice@finance-ni.gov.uk or on Tel: 028 90816724. The Executive Information Service operates an out of hours service For Media Enquiries Only between 1800hrs and 0800hrs Monday to Friday and at weekends and public holidays. The duty press officer can be contacted on 028 9037 8110.

7. Further information on the statistics provided in this publication can be obtained from NISRA Customer Services at:

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