

Article

Drug misuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2024

An overview of the extent and trends of illicit drug use. Data are from the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

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1 . Main points

- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated 8.8% of people aged 16 to 59 years (around 2.9 million people) reported using any drug in the last 12 months for the year ending (YE) March 2024; there was no statistically significant change, compared with YE March 2023.
- Around 3.0% of people (approximately 1 million people) reported using a Class A drug in the last 12 months; there was no statistically significant change from the previous year.
- Cannabis use decreased to 6.8% of people (around 2.3 million people) from 7.6% (around 2.5 million people) in the previous year, returning to levels seen a decade ago.
- Use of nitrous oxide and crack cocaine decreased, compared with the previous year from 1.3% to 0.9%, and 0.1% to 0.03%, respectively; magic mushroom use increased from 0.8% to 1.1%.
- Around 1.8% of people were frequent drug users (more than once a month); this is a decrease from the previous year (2.3%).
- Drug use was higher among people aged 16 to 24 years, with 16.5% reporting any usage; there was no statistically significant change, compared with previous year.

2 . Overall trends in drug misuse

Any drug use

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated 8.8% of people aged 16 to 59 years (approximately 2.9 million people) and 16.5% of people aged 16 to 24 years (around 971,000 people) used "any drug" in the past 12 months in the year ending (YE) March 2024 (Figure 1). A definition of "any drug" can be found in [Section 7: Glossary](#).

There was no statistically significant change in prevalence of any drug use for people aged 16 to 59 years, compared with YE March 2023 (9.5%) and YE March 2014 (8.8%).

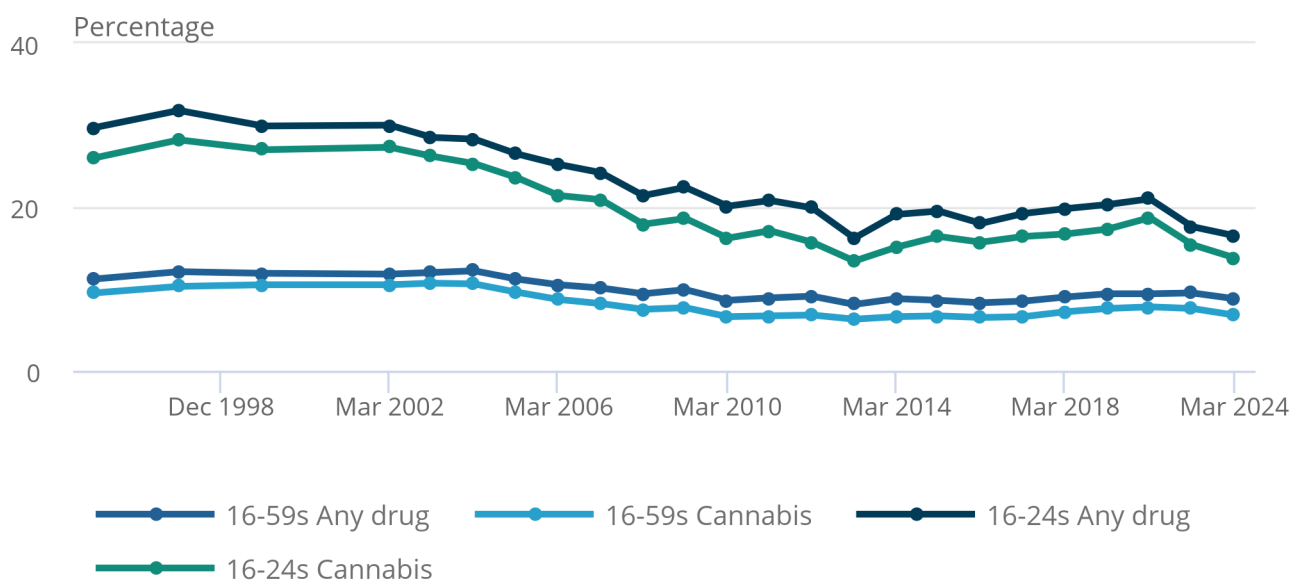
There was also no statistically significant change in any drug use for people aged 16 to 24 years, compared with YE March 2023 (17.6%) and YE March 2014 (19.1%). However, this was lower than the YE March 2020 (21.0%).

Figure 1: Any drug use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years has remained similar to year ending March 2023

Proportion of people reporting use of any drug and cannabis in the last year, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1995 to YE March 2024

Figure 1: Any drug use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years has remained similar to year ending March 2023

Proportion of people reporting use of any drug and cannabis in the last year, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1995 to YE March 2024



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for YE December. All other years are for YE March.

Any Class A drug use

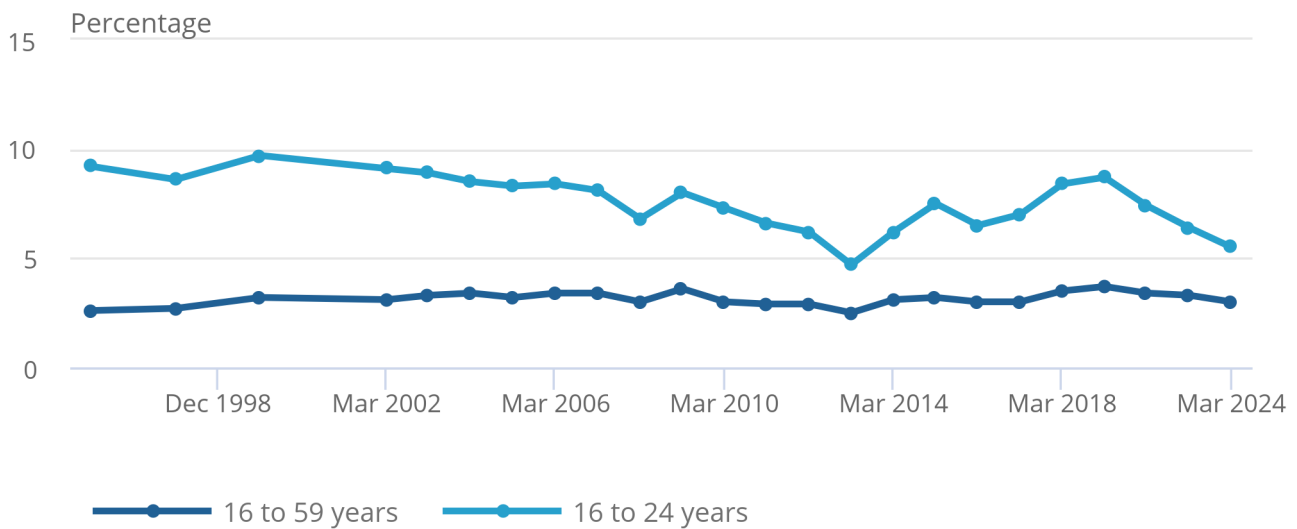
In YE March 2024, 3.0% of people aged 16 to 59 years (around one million people) and 5.5% of people aged 16 to 24 years (approximately 327,000 people) had taken a Class A drug in the last year (Figure 2). This represented no statistically significant change, compared with YE March 2023 or YE March 2014. For a definition of "any Class A drug", please refer to [Section 7: Glossary](#).

Figure 2: There was no change in the prevalence of Class A drug use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years or people aged 16 to 24 years

Proportion of people reporting use of Class A drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1995 to YE March 2024

Figure 2: There was no change in the prevalence of Class A drug use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years or people aged 16 to 24 years

Proportion of people reporting use of Class A drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1995 to YE March 2024



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for YE December. All other years are for YE March.

Trends in use of individual drug types for the year ending March 2024

Cannabis

Cannabis has consistently been the most used drug in England and Wales since estimates began in YE December 1995 (Figure 1). In the latest year, 6.8% of people aged 16 to 59 years and 13.8% of people aged 16 to 24 years reported having used the drug in the last year. Levels were lower for those aged 16 to 59 years, compared with YE March 2023 (7.6%), but there was no statistically significant change for those aged 16 to 24 years.

Powder cocaine

There was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of powder cocaine use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years (2.1%) and 16 to 24 years (3.8%), compared with YE March 2023.

Nitrous oxide

In the last year, 0.9% of people aged 16 to 59 years had used nitrous oxide. This is a decrease, compared with YE March 2023 (1.3%). There was no statistically significant change in the use of nitrous oxide in those aged 16 to 24 years (3.3%), compared with the previous year, but levels were lower, compared with YE March 2014 (7.6%).

Ecstasy

Prevalence of ecstasy use in the last year remained similar to YE March 2023. Around 1.2% of people aged 16 to 59 years and 2.2% of people aged 16 to 24 years reported taking this drug in the last year. However, ecstasy use was lower in 16 to 59 year olds, compared with YE March 2014 (1.6%).

Hallucinogens

There was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of overall hallucinogen (lysergic acid diethylamide and magic mushrooms) use in the last year in people aged 16 to 59 years (1.2%) or 16 to 24 years (2.9%), compared with YE March 2023. However, there was an increase in magic mushroom use in people aged 16 to 59 years, from 0.8% to 1.1%.

Other drugs

Prevalence of use in the last year was below one percent for all other individual drug types, except for ketamine (2.9%) and new psychoactive substances (1.7%) in those aged 16 to 24 years. There was no statistically significant change in ketamine use, compared with YE March 2023 and YE March 2014 in those aged 16 to 24 years. However, there was an increase in those aged 16 to 59 years (0.8%), compared with YE March 2014 (0.6%).

There were no statistically significant changes for other individual drug types, compared with YE March 2023 (Figure 3). This is except for crack cocaine use in those aged 16 to 59 years, which decreased to around 0.03% from 0.10%.

Figure 3: Crack cocaine and nitrous oxide use decreased in the last year, while use of magic mushrooms increased for people aged 16 to 59 years

Proportion of people reporting use of drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1995 to YE March 2024

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for YE December. All other years are for YE March.

The latest estimates of lifetime drug use and drug use in the last month can be found in section 1 of the [accompanying dataset](#).

Download the data

3 . Frequency of drug use in the last year

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated 1.8% of people aged 16 to 59 years (around 610,000 people) were frequent drug users in the year ending (YE) March 2024. This is lower than in YE March 2023 (2.3%). Around 150,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years (2.5%) were frequent drug users in YE March 2024, which is also lower than in YE March 2023 (4.7%). "Frequent users" are those who took any drug more than once a month in the last year.

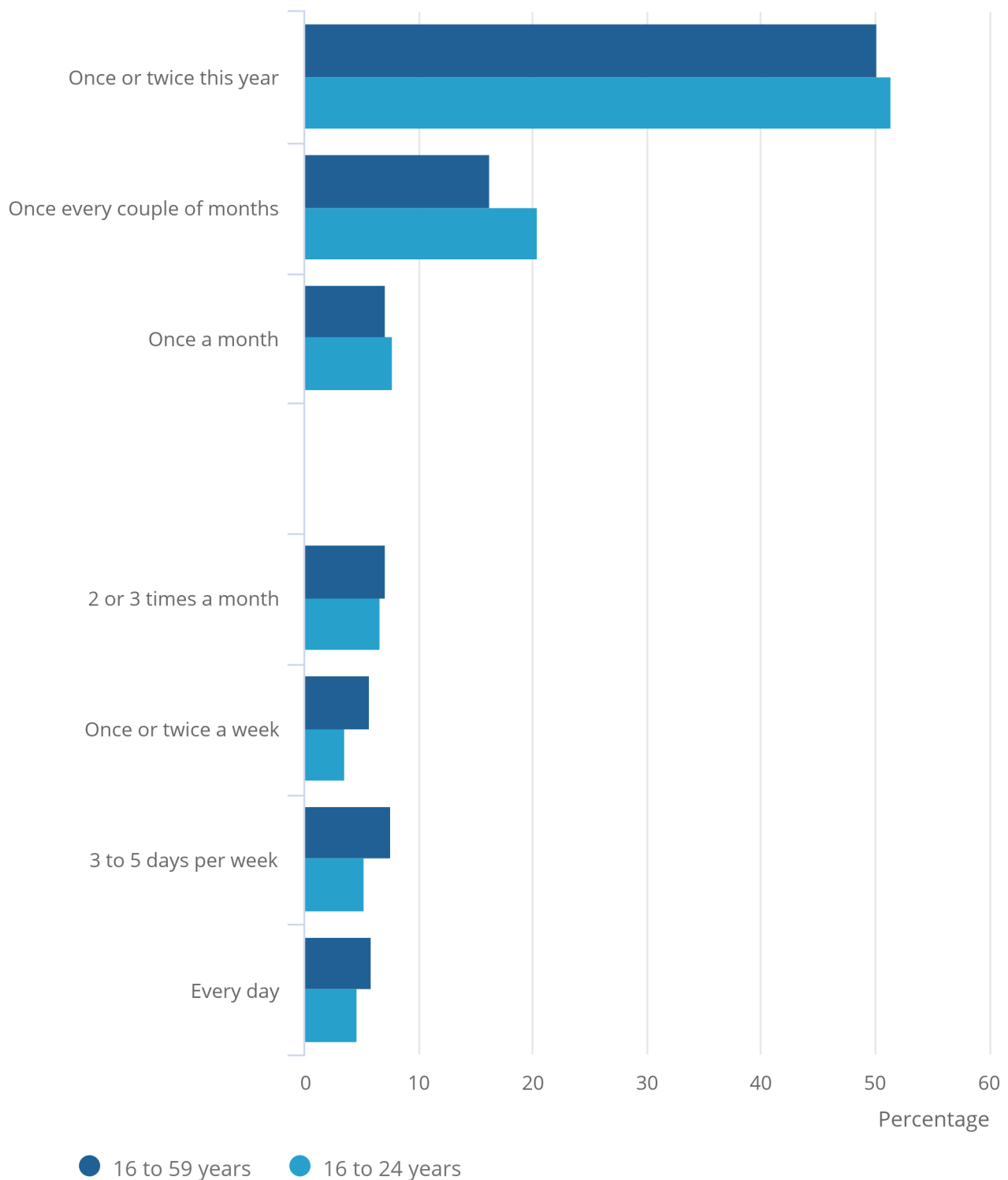
Around three-quarters of people aged 16 to 59 years who used any drug in the last year were infrequent users (73.7%), with half (50.3%) taking them only "once or twice" (Figure 4). Around four in five (79.8%) people aged 16 to 24 years were infrequent users.

Figure 4: Most people who had taken drugs in the last year used them infrequently

Frequency of use in people aged 16 to 59 years and aged 16 to 24 years who had taken any drug in the last year, England and Wales, year ending March 2024

Figure 4: Most people who had taken drugs in the last year used them infrequently

Frequency of use in people aged 16 to 59 years and aged 16 to 24 years who had taken any drug in the last year, England and Wales, year ending March 2024



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Around one-third of people (34.0%) aged 16 to 59 years who used cannabis in the last year used the drug more than once a month, with 10.0% using it every day. The proportion of frequent users was similar to YE March 2023 (35.4%), but lower than ten years ago (42.8% in YE March 2014).

Frequency of drug use is not a measure of drug dependence. The latest information on drug dependence in England is reported in the NHS's [Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014](#). A total of 3.1% of people aged 16 years or over showed signs of drug dependence. This includes 2.3% who were dependent on cannabis only, and 0.8% who were dependent on other drugs. There were 5,448 deaths related to drug poisoning that were registered in England and Wales in 2023. Of these deaths, 3,618 were identified as drug misuse. See our [Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2023 registrations bulletin](#) for further information.

More detailed figures on the frequency of drug use can be found in Section 2 of the [accompanying dataset](#).

4 . Drug user characteristics

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated the proportion of younger people aged 16 to 24 years (16.5%) reporting any drug use in the last year was higher for the year ending (YE) March 2024, compared with older people aged 25 to 59 years (7.2%) (Figure 5).

There were no statistically significant changes in any drug use in the different age groups, compared with YE March 2023. However, there were increases in any drug use for those aged 45 to 54 years and 55 to 59 years, compared with YE March 2014.

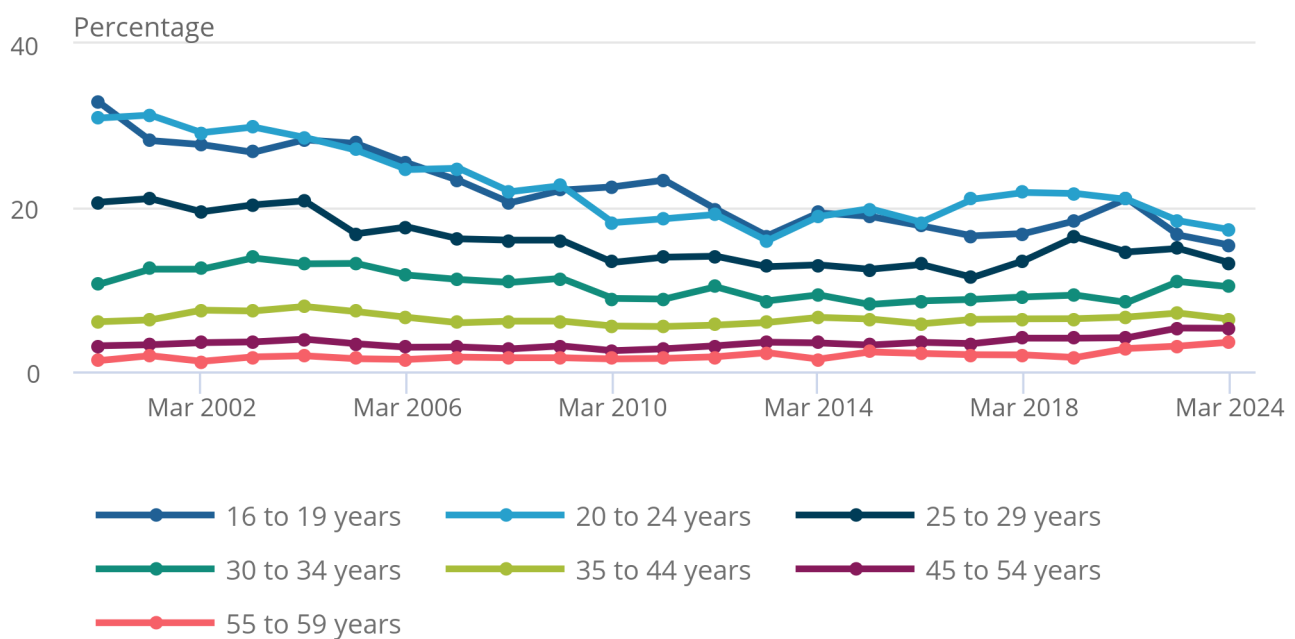
There has been a narrowing in the differences between age groups since these data were first collected in the CSEW in the 1990s. This is a result of drug use decreasing in younger age groups and increasing in older age groups.

Figure 5: Younger people were more likely to have taken a drug in the last year than older people

Proportion of people who reported using a drug in the last year by age, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1997 to YE March 2024

Figure 5: Younger people were more likely to have taken a drug in the last year than older people

Proportion of people who reported using a drug in the last year by age, England and Wales, year ending (YE) December 1997 to YE March 2024



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

Notes:

1. Data for 1997 and 1999 are for YE December. All other years are for YE March.

Prevalence of drug use varied by a range of other characteristics. For example, those who were married or in a civil partnership were less likely to have used a drug in the past year (3.6%), compared with those who were cohabiting (12.3%), single (14.5%), separated (9.2%), or divorced or in a legally dissolved partnership (7.2%).

People with household incomes of less than £10,400 per year were more likely to have used cannabis (10.7%) than those with higher incomes, except for those earning between £10,400 and £20,800 (Figure 6).

People with household incomes of more than £52,000 per year were more likely to have used a Class A drug (4.0%) than those with incomes between £31,200 and £52,000. Differences were not statistically significant, compared with those with lower household incomes.

It is important to note that personal and household characteristics are not necessarily independently related to drug use. For example, the relationship between drug use and marital status may be influenced by age.

Figure 6: Levels of drug use by household income varied by drug type

Proportion of people aged 16 to 59 years who reported using a drug in the last year by total household income, England and Wales, year ending March 2024

Figure 6: Levels of drug use by household income varied by drug type

Proportion of people aged 16 to 59 years who reported using a drug in the last year by total household income, England and Wales, year ending March 2024



Source: Crime Survey for England and Wales from the Office for National Statistics

More detailed figures on characteristics of drug users can be found in Section 3 of the [accompanying dataset](#).

5 . Obtaining drugs

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) estimated that a friend, neighbour or colleague was the most common source of illegal drugs (48.9%) and nitrous oxide or new psychoactive substances (NPS) (37.8%) among people aged 16 to 59 years who had taken drugs in the last 12 months in the year ending (YE) March 2024. The next most common source of illegal drugs was a known dealer (11.2%). The next most common source for nitrous oxide or NPS was a shop (14.8%).

Two-fifths of people aged 16 to 59 years (39.2%) claimed it would be "very" or "fairly" easy to obtain illegal drugs within 24 hours, which is similar to YE March 2023 (38.0%). A quarter (25.4%) of people claimed it would be "very" or "fairly" easy for them to obtain nitrous oxide or NPS within 24 hours, which is similar to YE March 2023 (24.9%).

More detailed figures on the sources and ease of obtaining drugs can be found in Section 5 of the [accompanying dataset](#).

6 . Data on drug misuse in England and Wales

[Drug misuse in England and Wales - Appendix table](#)

Dataset | Released 12 December 2024

Data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) on the extent and trends of illicit drug use.

7 . Glossary

Any drug

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) asks questions on the use of specific drugs. "Any drug" use is a composite variable that combines individual drugs. These include:

- amphetamines
- anabolic steroids
- cannabis
- cocaine (crack and powder)
- ecstasy
- heroin
- ketamine
- lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD)
- magic mushrooms
- mephedrone
- methadone
- methamphetamine
- nitrous oxide
- tranquillisers

In addition to these named drugs, respondents were asked whether they had taken something else in the same period. These include:

- pills or powders (not prescribed by a doctor) when the respondent did not know what they were
- smoking something (excluding tobacco) when the respondent did not know what it was
- taking anything else that the respondent knew, or thought, was a drug (not prescribed by a doctor)

These are included in the composite measure of "any drug", but are not presented individually in tables.

The definition of "any drug" has changed over time. For example, nitrous oxide was added in 2024 because it was [classified as a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 on 8 November 2023](#). More detailed descriptions on which drugs are included for each year can be found in Section 1 of the [accompanying dataset](#).

Any Class A drug

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 classifies controlled drugs into three categories - Class A, Class B, and Class C - according to the harm that they cause. Class A drugs are considered to be the most harmful. A list of drugs and their classifications can be found on the Home Office's [List of most commonly encountered drugs currently controlled under the misuse of drugs legislation guidance](#).

The CSEW asks questions on the use of specific drugs. Any Class A drug use is a composite variable that combines individual drugs. These include:

- cocaine (crack and powder)
- ecstasy
- heroin
- LSD
- magic mushrooms
- methadone
- methamphetamine

New psychoactive substances

Substances such as mephedrone, spice, Gamma-butyrolactone (GBL) or gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB), salvia, and other emerging substances are collectively known as new psychoactive substances (NPS). This was often previously referred to as "legal highs".

These substances are usually intended to mimic the effects of "traditional" drugs like cannabis, ecstasy, or cocaine. They come in different forms, including herbal mixtures that are smoked, powders, crystals, tablets, or liquids.

Frequent drug user

A drug user is defined as "frequent" if they have taken the drug more than once a month in the last year.

8 . Data sources and quality

Data source

Drug misuse data included in this release are sourced from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). CSEW estimates are accredited official statistics and were [independently reviewed by the Office for Statistics Regulation](#) in October 2024. They comply with the standards of trustworthiness, quality and value in the [Code of Practice for Statistics](#) and should be labelled "accredited official statistics".

Crime Survey for England and Wales

The CSEW is primarily an interviewer-administered face-to-face victimisation survey asked of people aged 16 years and over. It covers the population living in households in England and Wales. It does not include the population living in group residences (for example, care homes or student halls of residence) or other institutions, such as prisons.

We have conducted significance testing to compare estimates for the year ending (YE) March 2024 with YE March 2023, YE March 2014 for a ten-year comparison, and YE December 1995, which are the earliest data available. This is done to understand trends over time, where possible. Other comparison years have been used where these data are not available.

Estimates in this bulletin are based on data from the CSEW self-completion module. The upper age limit for respondents eligible for the self-completion module was removed from YE March 2020 onwards. However, it remains in place for questions on drug use because of the low prevalence of drug use in those aged 60 years and over.

New psychoactive substances

Some new psychoactive substances (NPS) were previously legal to supply if they were not already controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, all of these are now illegal to supply, produce and import.

The CSEW only measures generic, rather than specific, NPS. As a result, this estimate does not provide a measure of all drugs controlled under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016. This is because many NPS are controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, and several non-NPS are controlled under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

Strengths and limitations

The CSEW is recognised as a good measure of drug use for the drug types and population it covers. However, it does not provide good coverage of problematic drug use. This is because users may not be a part of the household resident population that is covered by the survey.

The CSEW does not cover some small groups, which is potentially important because they may have relatively high rates of drug use. These groups include homeless people and those living in certain institutions, such as prisons. The CSEW also does not cover students living in halls of residence.

Disclosure issues still exist around willingness to report drug use. This is despite the self-completion methodology of the survey, which is intended to encourage honest answers. An unknown proportion of respondents may not report their behaviour honestly. However, the CSEW provides consistent measures of drug use and comparisons over time remain valid.

The CSEW is likely to underestimate the level of drug misuse in England and Wales because of these possible limitations.

It should also be recognised that levels of drug use are relatively low. Some drugs, such as heroin, are particularly rare and only have a small number of users. The range of variability for these drugs will be quite large because of sampling variability, so figures will be liable to fluctuation from year to year. Changes from one year to the next should be interpreted with caution, and users should pay greater attention to the medium-term and longer-term trends.

It is also important to note that the definition of "any drug" changes over time as new drugs become available and the classification of drugs change. For example, nitrous oxide was added in 2024 because it was [classified as a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 on 8 November 2023](#).

9 . Related links

[Guide to finding crime statistics](#)

Methodology | Last revised 24 July 2024

This guide collates the main sources of crime statistics produced by multiple government departments, organised by area of interest, to provide an efficient way to find the crime statistics needed.

[User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2024](#)

Methodology | Last revised 24 July 2024

Detailed information on datasets and methods used to compile our crime statistics.

[Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2023 registrations](#)

Bulletin | Released 23 October 2024

Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales from 1993 to 2023, by cause of death, sex, age, and substances involved in the death.

[Adult substance misuse treatment statistics 2022 to 2023: report](#)

Report | Updated 21 December 2023

Alcohol and drug misuse and treatment in adults from Public Health England's (PHE) national drug treatment monitoring system (NDTMS).

[Young people's substance misuse treatment statistics 2022 to 2023: report](#)

Report | Published 25 January 2024

Alcohol and drug misuse and treatment in young people (aged under 18 years) from PHE's NDTMS.

[Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England, 2023](#)

Report | Published 17 October 2024

Report and tables from NHS England on the smoking (including electronic cigarette use), alcohol drinking and drug use among young people in England.

10 . Cite this article

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