

Article

Drug misuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2023

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

- In the year ending March 2023, an estimated 9.5% of people aged 16 to 59 years (approximately 3.1 million people) reported using a drug in the last 12 months; 7.6% reported using cannabis (around 2.5 million people) and 3.3% reported using a Class A drug (around 1.1 million people).
- Although there were no statistically significant changes in prevalence compared with the year ending March 2020, levels were higher compared with ten years ago (year ending March 2013) for any drug (8.1%), cannabis (6.3%) and Class A drugs (2.5%), where prevalence were at all-time lows across these three categories.
- For most individual drug types, there were no changes in use compared with the year ending March 2020, except for hallucinogens (including magic mushrooms), ecstasy and nitrous oxide; while the prevalence of hallucinogen use increased from 0.7% to 1%, ecstasy use fell from 1.4% to 1.1% and nitrous oxide use fell from 2.4% to 1.3%.
- Overall, 2.3% (approximately 777,000) of people were frequent drug users (they had taken a drug more than once a month in the last year) similar to the year ending March 2020 (2.1%).
- The prevalence of drug use was higher in people aged 16 to 24 years, with 17.6% (around one million people) reporting any drug use, a decrease compared with the year ending March 2020 (21.0%); this was largely a result of falls in cannabis use (from 18.7% to 15.4%) in this age group.

2 . Overall trends in drug misuse

In the year ending March 2023, an estimated 9.5% of people aged 16 to 59 years (approximately 3.1 million people) and 17.6% of people aged 16 to 24 years (around one million people) reported any drug use in the past 12 months. A definition of this can be found in [Section 7: Glossary](#).

Survey estimates in this release are based on the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Data from the CSEW for the year ending March 2023 are not designated as [National Statistics](#) and caution should be taken when using these data because of the potential impact of lower response rates on data quality.

Although there was no change in prevalence of any drug use for people aged 16 to 59 years compared with the year ending March 2020 (9.4%), levels increased by 17% compared with the year ending March 2013, where prevalence was at an all-time low (8.1%) (Figure 1).

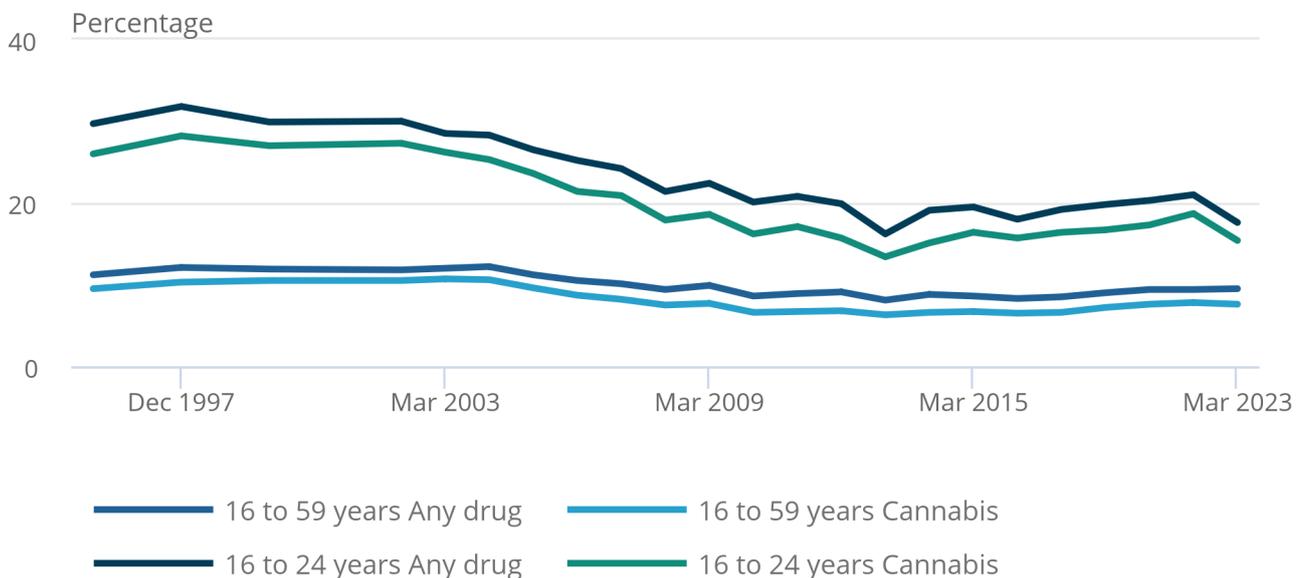
While the long-term trend for people aged 16 to 24 years are similar, the prevalence of any drug use decreased by 16% compared with the year ending March 2020 (21%, approximately 1.2 million people) and were at the lowest level since the year ending March 2013 (16.2%, around one million people).

Figure 1: Any drug and cannabis use in the last year decreased compared with the year ending March 2020, for people aged 16 to 24 years

Proportion of people reporting use of any drug and cannabis in the last year, England and Wales, year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2023

Figure 1: Any drug and cannabis use in the last year decreased compared with the year ending March 2020, for people aged 16 to 24 years

Proportion of people reporting use of any drug and cannabis in the last year, England and Wales, year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2023



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

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for the year ending December, all other years included are year ending March.

Any Class A drug use

In the year ending March 2023, 3.3% of people aged 16 to 59 years (around 1.1 million people) and 6.4% of people aged 16 to 24 years (approximately 380,000 people) had taken a Class A drug in the last year. A definition of this can be found in [Section 7: Glossary](#).

While there was no change in prevalence of Class A drug use for people aged 16 to 59 years compared with the year ending March 2020 (3.4%, approximately 1.1 million people), levels increased by 29% compared with the year ending March 2013 (2.5%, approximately 820,000 people) (Figure 2).

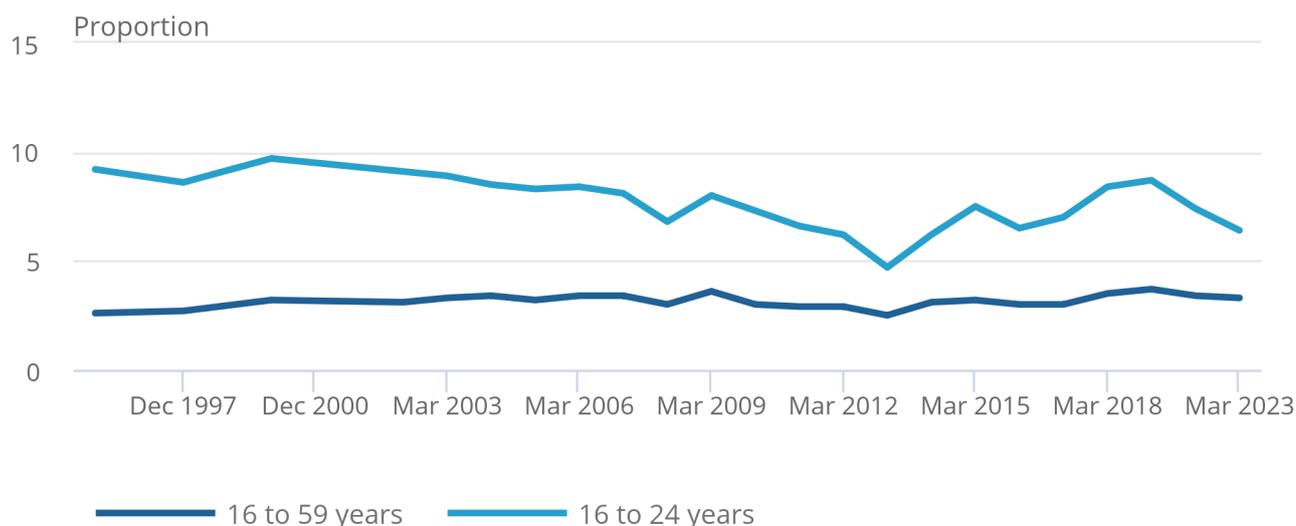
There was no statistically significant change in the prevalence of Class A drug use for 16- to 24-year-olds when compared with the year ending March 2020 (7.4%, approximately 439,000 people), and the year ending March 2013 (4.7%, approximately 294,000 people).

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

Proportion of people reporting use of class A drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2023

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

Proportion of people reporting use of class A drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2023



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

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for the year ending December, all other years included are year ending March.

Trends in use of individual drug types for the year ending March 2023

Cannabis

Since estimates began in the year ending December 1995, cannabis has consistently been the most used drug in England and Wales (Figure 1). In the latest year, 7.6% of people aged 16 to 59 years and 15.4% of people aged 16 to 24 years reported having used the drug in the last year. There was no change for those aged 16 to 59 years when compared with the year ending March 2020, but levels were 18% lower for those aged 16 to 24 years.

Powder cocaine

There was no change in the prevalence of powder cocaine use in the last year for people aged 16 to 59 years (2.4%) and 16 to 24 years (5.1%), compared with the year ending March 2020.

Nitrous oxide

In the last year, 1.3% of people aged 16 to 59 years and 4.2% of people aged 16 to 24 years had used nitrous oxide. This was a 48% and 54% decrease compared with the year ending March 2020, respectively.

Ecstasy

Prevalence of ecstasy use in the last year was at its lowest level since data were first collected. Around 1.1% of people aged 16 to 59 years and 2.4% of people aged 16 to 24 years reported taking this drug in the last year. This was a 21% and 41% decrease, respectively, compared with the year ending March 2020.

Hallucinogens

Prevalence of hallucinogen (lysergic acid diethylamide and magic mushrooms) use in the last year in people aged 16 to 59 years increased to 1% compared with the year ending March 2020 (0.7%); there was no significant change in those aged 16 to 24 years.

Prevalence of use in the last year was below one percent for all other individual drug types in the year ending March 2023, except for ketamine (3.8%) and new psychoactive substances (1.4%) in those aged 16 to 24 years.

There were no statistically significant changes compared with the year ending March 2020 for these other individual drug types (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Ecstasy and nitrous oxide use in the last year decreased while use of hallucinogens increased

Proportion of people reporting use of drugs in the last year, England and Wales, year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2023

Notes

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for the year ending December, all other years included are year ending 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](#).

3 . Frequency of drug use in the last year

In the year ending March 2023, an estimated 2.3% of people aged 16 to 59 years were frequent drug users (approximately 770,000), similar to the year ending March 2020 (2.1%). A frequent user is defined as having taken any drug more than once a month in the last year. Around 280,000 young people aged 16 to 24 years were frequent drug users in the year ending March 2023 (4.7%), no statistically significant change compared with the year ending March 2020.

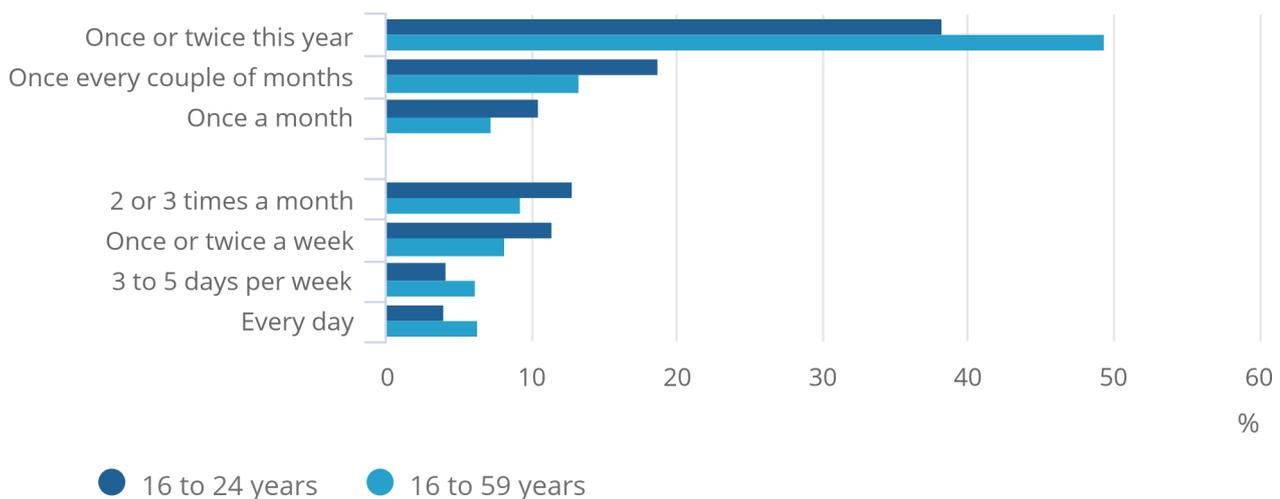
The majority of people aged 16 to 59 years who reported using any drug in the last year were infrequent users (70%), with almost half (49.4%) reporting they had only taken them “once or twice” (Figure 4). The proportion of people aged 16 to 24 years that were infrequent users was similar (67.6%).

Figure 4: The majority of people who had taken drugs in the last year used them infrequently

Frequency of use (%) in people aged 16 to 59 and 16 to 24 years who had taken any drug in the last year, England and Wales, year ending March 2023

Figure 4: The majority of people who had taken drugs in the last year used them infrequently

Frequency of use (%) in people aged 16 to 59 and 16 to 24 years who had taken any drug in the last year, England and Wales, year ending March 2023



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

Over one-third of people (35.4%) aged 16 to 59 years who used cannabis in the last year used the drug more than once a month, with 8.3% using it every day. Although the proportion of frequent users was similar to the year ending March 2020 (33.7%), this was lower than ten years ago (40.6% in the year ending March 2013).

Frequency of drug use in the last year is not a measure of drug dependence. The latest information on drug dependence in England is reported in the [Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey 2014](#) on the National Archives website. A total of 3.1% of people aged 16 years or over showed signs of dependence on drugs, including 2.3% who showed signs of dependence on cannabis only, and 0.8% had signs of dependence on other drugs.

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

4 . Drug user characteristics

For the year ending March 2023, the estimated proportion of people reporting any drug use in the last year was higher among younger age groups (17.6% of those aged 16 to 24 years) compared with older age groups (7.7% of those aged 25 to 59 years) (Figure 5).

The fall in drug use among those aged 16 to 24 years compared with the year ending March 2020, was only seen in men (from 25.1% to 19.1%), and was mainly because of a decrease in cannabis use.

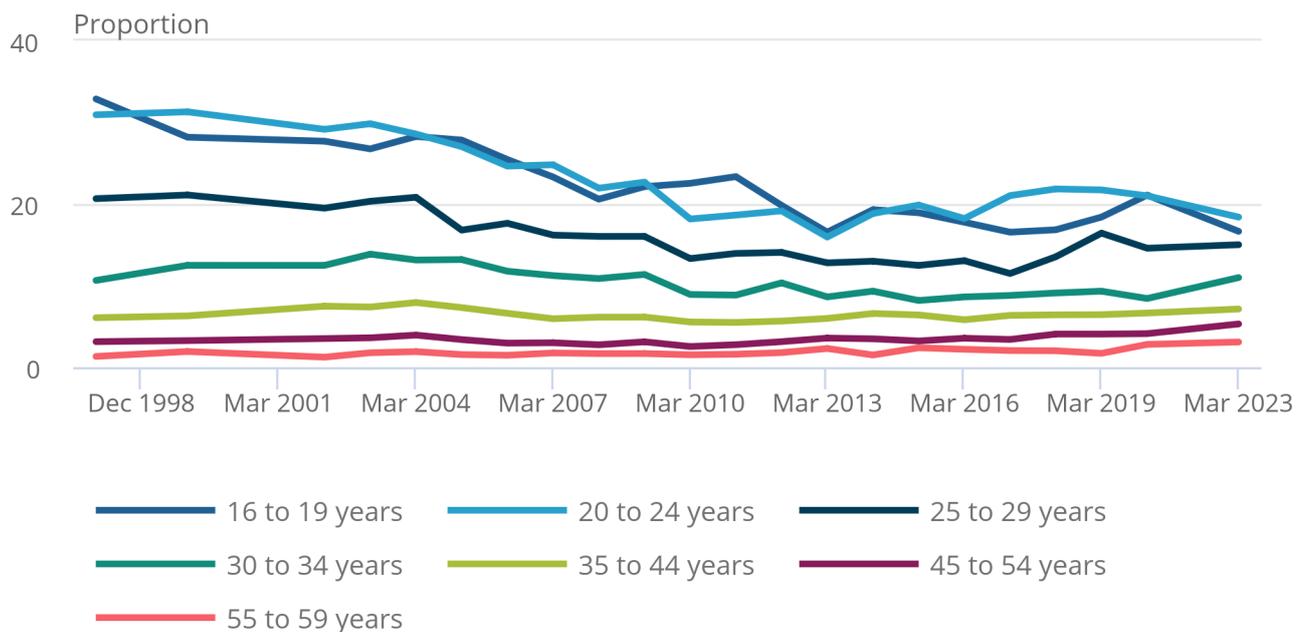
In contrast, there were increases in drug use among those aged 30 to 34 years and aged 45 to 54 years compared with the year ending March 2020. For those aged 30 to 34 years, this was mainly because of increases in cannabis and hallucinogen use (to 8.3% and 1.6%, respectively).

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 December 1997 to year ending March 2023

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 December 1997 to year ending March 2023



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

Notes:

1. Data for 1995, 1997 and 1999 are for the year ending December, all other years included are year ending March.

Prevalence of drug use also varied by a range of other characteristics. For example, those who were single were more likely to have used a drug in the past year (15.4%) compared with those who were married or in a civil partnership (4.2%).

Those with household incomes of less than £10,400 per year were more likely to use any drug in the last year (13.6%), and in particular cannabis (11.6%), than those with higher incomes. The only exception in both instances being those earning between £10,400 and £20,800 (Figure 6).

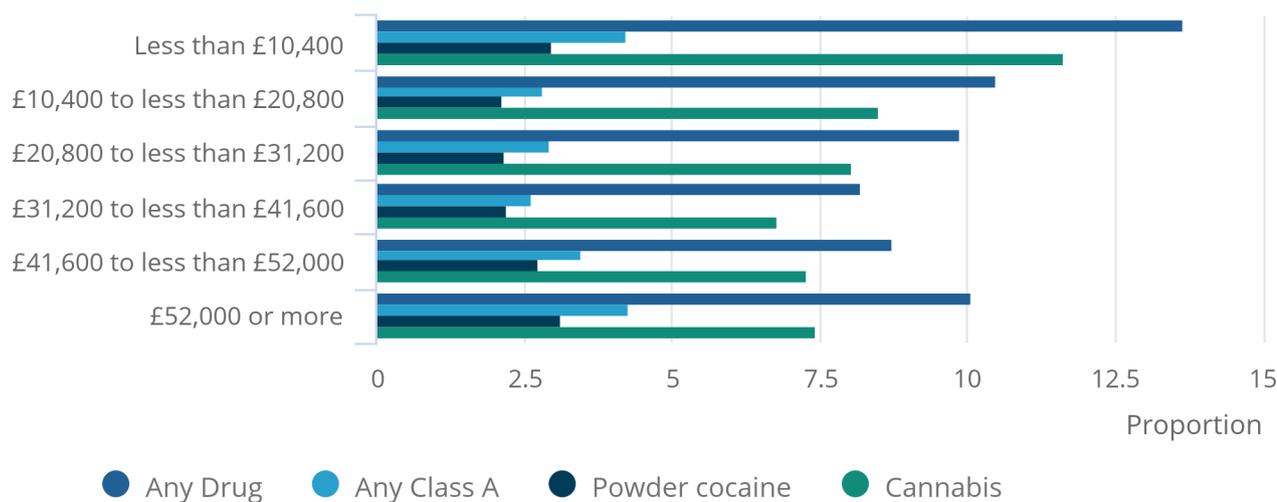
It is important to note that personal and household characteristics are not necessarily independently related to drug use. For example, the relationship between drug use and marital status may be related to age.

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 2023

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 2023



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

For more detailed figures on characteristics of drug users, see [Section 3 of the accompanying dataset](#).

5 . Obtaining drugs

In the year ending March 2023, among people aged 16 to 59 years who had taken drugs in the last 12 months, a friend, neighbour or colleague was the most common source of illegal drugs (45.7%) and nitrous oxide or new psychoactive substances (37%). The next most common source of illegal drugs was a known dealer, with 12.1% of people reporting that they obtained the drug this way; however, the next most common source of nitrous oxide or new psychoactive substances (NPS) was a shop, with 14.9% of people reporting obtaining the drug this way.

In the year ending March 2023, 38% of people aged 16 to 59 years claimed it would be “very”, or “fairly”, easy for them to obtain illegal drugs within 24 hours. This was lower than what was claimed in the year ending March 2020 (43.2%). A quarter (24.9%) of people claimed it would be “very”, or fairly, easy for them to obtain nitrous oxide or NPS within 24 hours, similar to the year ending March 2020 (25.3%).

6 . Drug misuse in England and Wales data

[Drug misuse in England and Wales](#)

Dataset | Released 14 December 2023

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, powder cocaine, crack cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, ketamine, lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), magic mushrooms, mephedrone, methadone, methamphetamine, and tranquillisers.

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

"Any drug" does not currently include nitrous oxide, as it was only classified as a controlled Class C drug in November 2023.

The definition of "any drug" has changed over time. 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 (Classes A, B and 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](#) GOV.UK web page.

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) asks questions on the use of specific drugs. Any Class A drug use is a composite variable that combines individual drugs. These include: powder cocaine, crack cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, LSD, magic mushrooms, and methadone.

Methamphetamine has also been included since the year ending March 2009.

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 such as 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 . Measuring the data

Crime Survey for England and Wales

Drug misuse data included in this release are sourced from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW). Our [User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2023](#) provides detailed information about the crime survey.

The CSEW covers the population living in households in England and Wales. It does not cover the population living in group residences (for example, care homes or student halls of residence) or other institutions, such as prisons.

The CSEW data for the year ending March 2023 are not National Statistics and caution must be taken when using these data. Significance testing has been conducted to compare estimates for the year ending March 2023 with the year ending March 2020, the year ending March 2013 (ten-year comparison) and the year ending December 1995 (earliest data available) to understand trends over time, where possible. Other comparison years have been used where these data are not available.

Estimates within this publication 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 2019 to 2020, but 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.

9 . Strengths and limitations

The Crime Survey for England and Wales (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, as 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, given that they may have relatively high rates of drug use. Notably these groups include homeless people and those living in certain institutions, such as prisons. It also does not cover students living in halls of residence.

Despite the self-completion methodology of the survey, which is intended to encourage honest answers, disclosure issues still exist around willingness to report drug use. 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.

As a result of these possible limitations, the CSEW is likely to underestimate the level of drug misuse in England and Wales.

Some tables typically published as part of this release have not been produced because of quality concerns or disclosure constraints.

It should also be recognised that levels of drug use are relatively low, and the use of 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 greater attention paid to the medium and longer-term trends.

10 . Related links

[Guide to finding crime statistics](#)

Methodology | Released 20 July 2023

Crime statistics are produced by multiple departments across government. The aim of this guide is to collate the main sources of crime statistics, broken down by potential areas of interest, to provide a more efficient way to find the crime statistics needed.

[User guide to crime statistics for England and Wales: March 2023](#)

User guide | Released 20 July 2023

Crime levels and trends in England and Wales, with detailed information on the datasets used to compile crime statistics.

[Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2021 registrations](#)

Bulletin | 3 August 2022

Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales from 1993 to 2021, by cause of death, sex, age, and substances involved in the death.

[Adult substance misuse treatment statistics 2021 to 2022: report](#)

Report | 4 October 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 2021 to 2022: report](#)

Report | 2 February 2023

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, 2021](#)

Report | 6 Sep 2022

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

11 . Cite this article

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