



Risk and protective factors for cannabis use in adolescence: a population-based survey in schools

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Policy Brief

Executive Summary

Cannabis use among Irish adolescents represents a significant public health concern, with **approximately 7.3% of 15–16-year-olds reporting use in the past 30 days**. Research indicates that various modifiable factors, including peer influence and parental supervision play a critical role in the initiation and continued use of cannabis among young people. This policy brief **outlines key risk and protective factors**, reviews the existing policy landscape, and provides targeted recommendations aimed at mitigating adolescent cannabis use through evidence-based interventions and public health strategies.

Background

Cannabis remains the **most widely used illicit substance among Irish youth**, with its prevalence increasing in alignment with global trends of decriminalisation and cultural normalisation. The early use of cannabis is associated with **significant negative health outcomes**, including a heightened risk of dependency, and mental health disorders such as psychosis and depression. Ireland's current drug policy framework, as outlined in the **"Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery"** strategy (2017-2025), prioritises a health-led response to substance use, focusing on prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. However, there remain critical gaps in targeted measures specifically addressing adolescent cannabis use.

Our Response

Given the above, we investigated adolescent risk and protective factors for cannabis use. Our evidence indicated several factors contribute to the likelihood of cannabis use among adolescents, as indicated by the 2021 **Planet Youth survey of over 4,400 young people**.

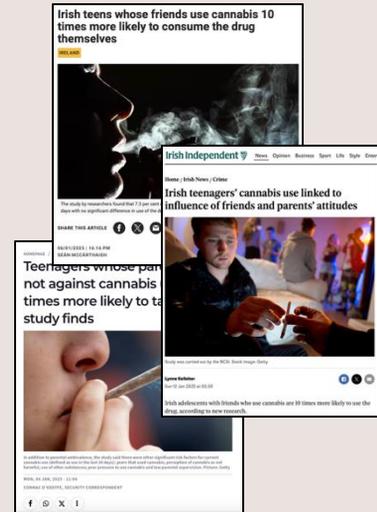


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- **Peer influence** is one of the strongest predictors, as adolescents with friends who use cannabis are significantly more likely to engage in use themselves.
- **Parental attitudes** also play a crucial role, with perceived ambivalence from parents substantially increasing the likelihood of adolescent cannabis consumption.
- **Substance use**, particularly alcohol, cigarettes, and e-cigarettes, is strongly associated with cannabis use.



A **key modifiable factor** is the **perception of harm**; adolescents who believe cannabis is not harmful are more than twice as likely to use it. Conversely, **various protective factors** have been identified that may reduce the risk of cannabis use among young people. **Increased parental supervision** is associated with lower rates of use, while participation in **structured leisure activities** such as sports and community programs provides positive alternatives to substance use. Public perception campaigns aimed at educating youth about the risks associated with cannabis have also been shown to shift attitudes and influence behaviour.



The Policy Landscape

Ireland's current drug policy framework **emphasises harm reduction and community-based prevention**. However, targeted interventions addressing adolescent cannabis use remain *insufficient*. There is limited engagement with parents in prevention efforts, a lack of peer-driven interventions, and inadequate public awareness campaigns specifically addressing the harms of cannabis use among adolescents.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, Ireland's current drug policy framework emphasises harm reduction and community-based prevention. However, addressing misconceptions about cannabis is essential. A **comprehensive public health campaign** should be implemented to educate both **adolescents and adults about the realities of cannabis use**, particularly in relation to high-potency products and their associated risks.

Furthermore, to ensure the effectiveness of these interventions, continuous monitoring and evaluation must be conducted. **Data-driven metrics** should be used to assess program outcomes, refine strategies, and allocate resources effectively.

Recommendations	Actions
1 Preventive Educational Programs	Strengthening prevention programs through school-based education initiatives aligned with the <i>Icelandic Prevention Model</i> is a crucial step. These programs should focus on the role of peer and parental influences while incorporating evidence-based curricula that highlight the mental health and developmental risks associated with cannabis use.
2 Strengthening Parental Engagement	Parental engagement must be enhanced through education campaigns emphasising the importance of supervision and clear anti-drug messaging. The development of parental support networks can foster collective community norms against adolescent substance use.
3 Community Initiatives	Community support initiatives should be expanded, particularly in high-risk areas. Increased funding and promotion of structured after-school programs can provide young people with constructive alternatives to substance use. Leveraging sports and arts initiatives can further strengthen protective factors and encourage positive youth development.