

Annex G: Drug-related Deaths – comparison with other countries

- G1. This Annex uses figures for the latest year (at the time of writing) for which other countries' statistics were available from a European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) report. It explains that Scotland's drug-related death figures imply a drug-death rate (relative to the number of people aged 15 to 64, inclusive) which is higher than those that have been reported by the European countries for which figures are available from the EMCDDA (although the EMCDDA warns that caution is required when comparing different countries' drug-death figures due to issues of coding, coverage and under-reporting in some countries).
- G2. When using the EMCDDA's figures for other countries, it must be remembered that the EMCDDA stated that
- difference in the national practices of coding the causes of deaths implies that direct comparisons between countries in the numbers or rates of DRDs should be made with caution
- (in the 'Limitations' section of its note on the ['Methods and Definitions'](#) used for the Statistical Bulletin which it published on 6 June 2019, which is available on the EMCDDA's website). That note gave some examples of differences between countries, such as (Note: the points in square brackets have been added by NRS):
- ... differences in which codes are applied. In particular, in some countries 'T' codes [which, for deaths from poisoning, identify the types of substances that were involved] are never or rarely used, whereas in others they are more frequently used. Where 'T' codes are not applied, the number of drug-induced deaths [refer to paragraph G4] would be an underestimate;
 - ... differences between countries in procedures for recording cases, and in the frequency of post-mortem toxicological investigations; and
 - information exchange between General Mortality Registers [GMRs, such as NRS] and Special Registers (forensic or police) is insufficient or lacking in some countries, which may compromise the completeness of the information.
- More recently, the ['methods and definitions for overdose deaths'](#) page of the 'Statistical Bulletin 2021' which the EMCDDA published on 9 June 2021 included the following:
- The EMCDDA encourages countries to both harmonise their data collection and reporting. Nevertheless, differences in the availability of autopsies and in coding practices between countries will influence the interpretation and comparability of the results.
- And, further down the page, the points made under 'Limitations' included the following:
- The key factors in the quality of the data on drug-induced deaths are the availability and nature of post-mortem investigations and the full use of this information for death certification and coding. The comparability of the national figures depends on the harmonisation of coding practices at national levels.
 - Notable issues related to coding include the following:
 - There are country differences in which codes are applied. In particular, in some countries T codes are never or rarely used, whereas in others they are more frequently used. Where T codes are not applied, the number of drug-induced deaths would be an underestimate.
 - A few countries still include cases due to psychoactive medicines or non-overdose deaths, generally as a limited proportion of the total.

- The GMR will not identify the presence of new psychoactive substances as there are no specific codes in the ICD-10 to code these substances. Deaths involving these substances would be coded with more general codes such as 'other stimulants'.

In addition, there are still differences between countries in procedures for recording cases, and in the frequency of post-mortem toxicological investigations. Information exchange between GMRs and SRs (forensic or police) is insufficient or lacking in some countries, which may compromise the completeness of the information.

The difference in the national practices of coding the causes of deaths implies that direct comparisons between countries in the numbers or rates of DRDs should be made with caution. However, the trends observed can give valuable insight if methods are maintained consistently within a country, especially when interpreted together with other drug indicators.

It follows that figures for different countries must be used cautiously.

- G3. It has been suggested that better identification and recording of such deaths may be a reason for the drug-death rate appearing to be higher in the UK (and, hence, Scotland) than in several other countries. For example:
- NRS normally allocates a 'T' code for every substance that was reported as being present in the deceased's body - so there should be very little (if any) under-estimation in the figures for Scotland. NRS understands that the UK's other GMRs also make good use of 'T' codes, so the UK's figures should not be underestimates;
 - Scotland has a good exchange of information, as forensic pathologists provide NRS with details of many drug-deaths (using the form which is shown at the end of Annex C) - so the data for Scotland should be more-or-less complete. NRS understands that the UK's other GMRs are usually told, by coroners, which drugs caused each death, so (again) the UK's figures should not be underestimates.

- G4. Table EMCDDA gives the number of 'drug-induced' deaths aged 15 to 64 inclusive, and the resulting rate per million population of that age, for various countries. These numbers were copied from Table A6, in the Annexes of the ['European Drug Report 2021'](#), which is available on the EMCDDA website. On page 5 of that publication, the 'Introductory note' starts thus:

This report is based on information provided to the EMCDDA by the EU Member States, Turkey and Norway, in an annual reporting process.

and later states that:

The United Kingdom left the European Union as of 1 February 2020 and is not included in the analysis presented in this report. UK data ... can be found in the country data tables annex.

'Drug-induced deaths' is the EMCDDA's term for deaths directly caused by illegal drugs, which it defines in terms of particular codes for the underlying causes of death, in some cases in combination with certain codes for the types of substance involved. Its definition appears in the EMCDDA 'methods and definitions' page that was referred to earlier. The EU countries are listed in order of the native language versions of their names - for example, Germany appears between Denmark and Estonia; and Austria is between Netherlands and Poland. The EMCDDA's Table A6 indicates that 2020 is the latest year for which drug-death statistics are available, but some countries' data are for earlier years. Because the UK is not among what the EMCDDA report's introductory note describes as

the countries participating in the European information system in 2020 (the EU Member States, Turkey and Norway)
there is no figure for the UK in this table.

- G5. Prior to 2021, Public Health England (PHE) collected and collated drug-related deaths statistics using a consistent methodology based on that used by the EMCDDA for the purpose of reporting figures on behalf of the UK (using the broadest available coverage within the UK) to international agencies. PHE also published these figures in its annual [United Kingdom Drug Situation Report](#). In 2020, PHE (which supplied the EMCDDA with the statistics for the UK) confirmed that the UK's figure in Table A6 of 'European Drug Report 2020' was (broadly speaking) the number of such deaths which occurred in 2017. (The Scottish component of the UK figure is the number of such deaths that were registered in Scotland in that year. Because deaths in Scotland are normally registered within a few days, the number that were registered in Scotland in any given year will be similar to the number that occurred in Scotland in that year.) In both editions, the EMCDDA's table has a footnote saying that, for the UK figure, "drug-induced deaths data do not include Northern Ireland". In 2020, PHE confirmed that that was the case: the 'UK' figures for 2017 covered only Great Britain rather than the UK as a whole. In 2021, PHE provided NRS with the corresponding figures for 2018 (again for GB, not the UK as a whole), and allowed NRS to publish them ahead of their expected publication by PHE later in 2021.
- G6. The corresponding figures for Scotland for 2022 have been added at the foot of the table. They were produced as follows:
- 881 drug-induced deaths (using the EMCDDA definition) aged 15 to 64 inclusive were registered in that year – extracted from NRS's drug-related deaths database.
 - the drug-induced death rate (aged 15-64) per million population was then calculated by dividing the drug-induced deaths aged 15-64 by the corresponding mid-year population estimate.
- G7. The same approach has been used to produce the equivalent figures for Scotland for 2017 – 2021.
- G8. It must be remembered that the figures for some countries may not be truly comparable with those for Scotland (or the UK as a whole), for reasons like those given in paragraphs G2 to G3. Page 79 of the EMCDDA's ['European Drug Report 2019'](#) included the following statement:
- Overdose data ... must be interpreted with caution. Among the reasons for this are systematic under-reporting in some countries, differences in the ways toxicological examinations are conducted and registration processes that can result in reporting delays.
- Because some countries' figures may be affected by (say) under-reporting, one cannot say that Scotland has a drug-induced death rate (aged 15-64) which is definitely 'X' times the level for the EU as a whole, or higher than that of exactly 'Y' European countries. However, it appears certain that Scotland's rate is well above the level of most (if not all) of the European countries for which figures are available from the EMCDDA report.

G9. Detailed work was carried out during 2022 to look at the comparability between countries of the UK. This work concluded that drug misuse deaths across the UK are not comparable and that any cross-UK comparisons should use the drug poisoning definition. Based on 2021 data (the latest year available for the whole of the UK) Scotland's drug poisoning deaths were 2.7 times the rate of the UK as a whole. This is further described in a [blog article](#) published by ONS and our own blog "[What actually counts as a drug death?](#)"