

## Main Points

As Scotland's annual numbers of these deaths are, on average, only just in double figures (Volatile Substance Abuse deaths) and in single figures (Helium deaths), they may be subject to large percentage year-to-year fluctuations. It follows that one should not make too much of the numbers for any one year, or of any apparent trend over a few years. A separate section of this website provides more information about [fluctuations in, and the possible unreliability of, statistics for small sub-groups](#). The definition of the statistics and some other points that should be kept in mind when using these figures are given in the [Methodology](#) document.

### Volatile Substance Abuse deaths

- Eight such deaths were registered in 2020. Over the years since 2000, the number has fluctuated, between as low as one death (in 2004) and a peak of 25 deaths (in 2011). In total, there were 226 such deaths in the 21 years, which represents an average of 10.8 per year. As the annual average for the latest three years (2018 to 2020) is 10, and the annual average for the latest five years (2016 to 2020) is also 10, it appears that the scale of recent years' numbers is broadly typical of that of the period as a whole.
- Males account for the majority of the deaths. Over the years, the pattern of deaths by age-group has changed. In the first nine years of the century, the 15-24 age-group tended to have more deaths than any other age-group. However, since about 2010, the 25-34 age-group has more often been the age-group with more deaths than any other. There have also tended to be more deaths of 35-44 year olds in recent years than there were in the first decade: indeed, in 2015, 2017 and 2018 the 35-44 age-group had more deaths than any of the other age-groups (on the other hand, there were no deaths of 35-44 year olds in 2019).
- In almost all cases, at least one volatile substance was believed to have been implicated in, or potentially contributed to, the cause of death. In some cases, other substances (such as benzodiazepines and/or opiates) may have been found in the person's body. As a result, some of these deaths (generally, a small proportion) are counted as 'drug-related' in terms of the National Records of Scotland (NRS) standard ('UK Drug Strategy') definition. A larger proportion (but still under half, in most years) are counted as 'drug poisoning' deaths, in terms of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'wide' definition.

### Helium deaths

- Two such deaths were registered in 2020. Over the years since 2000, the number has fluctuated: from no deaths (in 2000 to 2004) to peaks of 10 deaths (in 2012 and 2014). In total, there were 76 such deaths in the 21 years, which represents an average of 3.6 per year. As the annual average for the latest three years (2018 to 2020) is three, and the annual average for the latest five years

(2016 to 2020) is four, it appears that the scale of recent years' numbers is broadly typical of that of the period as a whole.

- Males account for the majority of the deaths. Analysis by age-group would not be appropriate because there are not many such deaths in each year.
- In all cases, helium was believed to have been implicated in, or potentially contributed to, the cause of death. Only two of these deaths were counted as 'drug-related' in terms of NRS's standard definition, but all were counted as 'drug poisoning' deaths, in terms of the ONS 'wide' definition.