

Drug-death rates - comparisons with other countries - 2016 2017 and 2018 - data available in August 2019

1. Introduction

1.1 This note provides three sets of comparisons of the drug-death rates of Scotland and some other countries. It is based on information which was available on 15 August 2019. International comparisons are often subject to 'health warnings': in this case, a number of points which are set out in Annex G of 'Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018' (which is available via '[Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018](#)').

1.2 The main findings are that, for comparisons on the basis of:

- 'drug-induced' deaths, as defined by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) (see [section 3](#)):
 - in 2016 and 2017, Scotland had a drug-death rate which was much higher than that of any EU country for which figures were available; and
 - in 2018, the Scottish rate was even higher.
- 'drug-related' deaths, in terms of the standard definition used by National Records of Scotland (NRS) (see [section 4](#)):
 - in 2018, Scotland's drug-death rate was around 3.4 times that of the UK as a whole. In 2016 and 2017, it was (respectively) 2.9 and 3.2 times that of the UK as a whole;
 - in 2018, Scotland's drug-death rate was around 4.6 times that of England. In 2016 and 2017, it was (respectively) 3.7 and 4.1 times that of England.
- what NRS refers to as the Office for National Statistics (ONS) 'wide' definition of drug poisoning deaths (see [section 5](#)):
 - in 2018, Scotland's drug-death rate was around 2.8 times that of the UK as a whole. In 2016 and 2017, it was (respectively) 2.5 and 2.6 times that of the UK as a whole;
 - in 2018, Scotland's drug-death rate was around 3.4 times that of England. In 2016 and 2017, it was (respectively) 3.0 and 3.1 times that of England.

1.3 The figures for other countries were taken from the following:

- EMCDDA's 'European Drug Report' – editions published in [2018](#) and [2019](#);
- ONS's 'Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales' – editions for [2016 and 2017](#) and [2018](#);
- Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) 'Drug Related and Drug Misuse Deaths' - edition containing figures for [2007 to 2017](#). Figures for Northern Ireland for 2018 are not due to be published until around the end of 2019. Therefore, NRS has assumed that they were exactly the same as they were in 2017 in order to estimate the number and rate for the UK as a whole for 2018. It is expected that such estimates will have, at worst, only very small percentage margins of error, because Northern Ireland accounted for only about 3% of drug-deaths in the UK in 2016 and 2017.
- Mid-year populations for England, Wales and Northern Ireland from [ONS Table MYE4](#) (one of a number of tables in a workbook)

2. Background

2.1 ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’ was published by NRS on 16 July 2019. In it, Table EMCDDA included the latest available numbers of ‘drug-induced’ deaths (the EMCDDA’s definition) aged 15 to 64, and rates (per million population aged 15 to 64), for other countries, which had been published by the EMCDDA on 6 June 2019, in its ‘European Drug Report 2019’ (available via the relevant link in paragraph 1.3). Those figures were taken from Table A6 of the EMCDDA’s publication, which gives such statistics for each EU country for which they were available, and also for Norway and Turkey. That table made it clear that the statistics for the UK were for 2016. Therefore, Table EMCDDA of ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’ gave the corresponding figures for Scotland for 2016, for consistency with the figures for the UK. On that basis, the Scottish drug-death rate was much higher than those of the UK and of the other EU countries.

2.2 ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’ also included, in paragraph G9 of Annex G, drug-related death figures for Scotland and for the UK as a whole, on the basis of NRS’s standard definition, for 2016. These figures were included as they provide further evidence of Scotland’s drug-death rate being much higher than that of the UK as a whole for 2016.

2.3 Since ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’ was published, NRS has been asked for comparisons of countries’ drug-death rates that are more up-to-date than the figures for 2016. This note therefore provides the comparisons for 2016, 2017 and 2018 that were possible following the publication by ONS, on 15 August 2019, of the drug-death figures for England and Wales for 2018 (available via the relevant link in paragraph 1.3).

2.4 NRS intends to expand Table EMCDDA and Annex G of ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland’, with effect from the ‘in 2019’ edition, to include any figures that are available (at the time it is prepared) for years that are after the year of the UK figures in the EMCDDA publication. Therefore, there should be little need for this note to be updated in future.

3. ‘Drug-induced’ deaths aged 15 to 64 (‘EMCDDA basis’ figures)

3.1 More information about the EMCDDA definition of ‘drug-induced’ deaths, and about figures produced using that definition, is available in the EMCDDA’s ‘European Drug Report 2019’ and in the other material accompanying that publication (which can be found via the relevant link in paragraph 1.3), and in paragraphs G2 to G8 of Annex G of ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’.

3.2 Table 1 gives figures taken from the EMCDDA’s ‘European Drug Report’ publications. For most countries, the most up-to-date drug-induced death figures (appearing in the report which the EMCDDA published on 6 June 2019) were for 2017. For those countries, the corresponding figures for 2016 have also been provided. They were taken from the previous edition of the EMCDDA report, which was published in June 2018 (and is available via the relevant link in paragraph 1.3). NRS has calculated figures for Scotland on the same basis for 2016, 2017 and 2018 (although figures for 2018 are not available for other countries).

3.3 Table 1 shows that the Scottish drug-induced death rates for 2016 and 2017 (respectively, 213 and 229 drug-induced deaths aged 15 to 64 per million population aged 15 to 64) were well above those reported for all the other countries (Estonia had the next highest rates in both years, with 132 and 130 per million, respectively). The Scottish rate for 2016 (213 per million) was almost three times that of the UK as a whole (74 per million).

3.4 As the Scottish rate for 2018 was even higher (295 per million), it seems likely that it will be seen to be even further above the drug-induced death rates of the UK and the other EU countries for 2018, when they become available.

3.5 Comparisons of countries' figures on the basis of the EMCDDA definition are subject to 'health warnings' which appear in paragraphs G2 to G8 of Annex G of 'Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018'.

4. Drug-related deaths on the basis of NRS's standard definition

4.1 NRS's standard definition of drug-related deaths, which is used for most of the statistics that appear in 'Drug-related Deaths in Scotland', is based on the definition of drug-related deaths that was introduced in 2001 for the 'baseline' figures for the UK Drugs Strategy. More information about this definition is available from 'Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018', in its Annex A and in paragraphs G9 and G10 of its Annex G.

4.2 Table 2 gives statistics based on NRS's standard definition. The figures for England, Wales and Northern Ireland were taken from ONS and NISRA publications that are available via the relevant links in paragraph 1.3. Please note that ONS and NISRA use the term 'drug misuse deaths' when referring to the number of deaths on the basis of NRS's standard definition (i.e. the definition used for the 'baseline' for the UK Drugs Strategy).

4.3 Table 2 shows that the Scottish drug-related death rates for 2016 and 2017 (respectively, 161 and 172 per million population) were well above the corresponding rates for the UK as a whole (in both years, 54 per million): the Scottish rate for 2016 was 2.9 times that of the UK as a whole, and the rate for 2017 was 3.2 times the UK rate.

4.4 The Scottish drug-related death rate for 2018 was 218 per million population. NRS has estimated that the rate for the UK as a whole was around 63 per million (see paragraph 1.3), so the Scottish rate for 2018 was roughly 3.4 times the UK rate.

4.5 The difference between Scotland and England is even greater: the Scottish drug-related death rate was 3.7 times the rate for England for 2016, 4.1 times the rate for 2017, and 4.6 times the rate for 2018.

4.6 Comparisons of countries' figures on the basis of the NRS standard definition are subject to slight 'health warnings' which appear in paragraph G10 of Annex G of 'Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018'.

5. Drug-deaths on the basis of what NRS refers to as the ONS ‘wide’ definition

5.1 This definition is ‘wider’ than NRS’s standard definition, because it includes (for example) deaths from poisoning by drugs which are not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (such as aspirin, ibuprofen and paracetamol). More information about this definition, and how it differs from NRS’s standard definition, is available from Annex B of ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’.

5.2 Table 3 gives statistics on the basis of the ONS ‘wide’ definition. The figures for England, Wales and Northern Ireland were taken from taken from ONS and NISRA publications that are available via the relevant links in paragraph 1.3. Please note that, in their publications, ONS uses the term ‘drug poisoning deaths’, and NISRA uses the term ‘drug-related deaths’, for the number of deaths on the basis of what NRS refers to as the ONS ‘wide’ definition.

5.3 Table 2 shows that the Scottish drug-death rates, on the basis of the ONS ‘wide’ definition, for 2016 and 2017 (respectively, 184 and 193 per million population) were well above the corresponding rates for the UK as a whole (respectively, 74 and 75 per million): the Scottish rate for 2016 was 2.5 times that of the UK as a whole, and the rate for 2017 was 2.6 times the UK rate.

5.4 The Scottish ‘wide’ definition drug-death rate for 2018 was 241 per million population. NRS has estimated that the rate for the UK as a whole was around 87 per million (see paragraph 1.3), so the Scottish rate for 2018 was roughly 2.8 times the UK rate.

5.5 The difference between Scotland and England is even greater: the Scottish ‘wide’ definition drug-death rate was 3.0 times the rate for England for 2016, 3.1 times the rate for 2017, and 3.4 times the rate for 2018.

5.6 Comparisons of countries’ figures on the basis of the ONS ‘wide’ definition may be affected by some of the factors which are mentioned in paragraph G10 of Annex G of ‘Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2018’.