NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ESTIMATES OF THE PREVALENCE OF OPIATE AND/OR CRACK COCAINE USE 2008–09: A SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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OVERVIEW

This report summarises the results of a follow-up study to a three year project to estimate the prevalence of 'problem drug use' (defined as use of opiates and/or crack cocaine) nationally (England only), regionally and locally. The follow-up was carried out two years after the final sweep of the original project, so could therefore be considered as 'sweep 5'. An overview of the national and regional estimates are presented in this report, as are comparisons with the estimates produced by the third (2006-07) sweep of the study. Estimates for 2007-08 are not available as a study was not commissioned for that year.

Information about the number of people who use illicit drugs such as heroin, other opiates or crack cocaine is key to formulating effective policies for tackling drug-related harm as these drugs are associated with the highest levels of harm. It also helps inform service provision at the local level and provides a context in which to understand the population impact of interventions to reduce drug-related harm.

Direct enumeration of those engaged in a largely covert activity such as the use of class A drugs is difficult and standard household survey techniques tend to underestimate the extent of such activity. Indirect techniques making use of various data sources offer a more reliable way of calculating prevalence estimates for the use of opiates and/or crack cocaine. The estimates presented in this report are derived using two indirect measurement techniques: the capture-recapture method (CRC); and the multiple indicator (MIM) method. These methods are described in detail in Hay et al., 2006 and Hay et al., 2007a. Methodological developments throughout the course of the previous three sweeps are discussed elsewhere (Hay et al., 2007b, Hay et al., 2008). The individuals covered by this study were people aged 15 to 64 and resident in each DAT area, and known to be using heroin, methadone, other opiate drugs or crack cocaine.

RESULTS

TABLE 1

Table 1 presents the 2008-09 national estimates and prevalence rates for those using opiates/crack cocaine.

Overall in 2008-09 there were an estimated 321,229 problem drug users in England; this corresponds to 9.41 per thousand of the population age 15-64.

TABLE 1: NATIONAL PREVALENCE ESTIMATES AND RATES PER 1,000 POPULATION AGED FROM 15-64 WITH 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS[1]

Drug	Estimate	95% Confidence Interval	Rate	95% Confidence Interval
Total problem drug use	321,229	316,684-329,025	9.41	9.27-9.64
Opiate	262,428	258,782-268,517	7.69	7.58-7.90
Crack cocaine	188,697	182,894-196,506	5.53	5.36-5.75

[1] The confidence interval shows the range of values within which we can be 95% certain that the true value sits.

TABLE 2

London, followed by the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, was the region with the highest estimated prevalence rate for problem drug use. The North West has the highest estimate for opiate use, followed by Yorkshire and the Humber, then North East. London has the highest crack cocaine estimates. The South East has the lowest estimated prevalence rate for all types of drug use, except for crack cocaine use, where Eastern England has the lowest rate per 1,000 population.

TABLE 2: ESTIMATED PREVALENCE (RATE PER 1,000 POPULATION) OF TOTAL PROBLEM DRUG USERS AND OPIATE USERS BY REGION

Region	Total problem drug use		Opiate		Crack cocaine	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
Eastern England	6.13	5.56-6.77	5.05	4.62-5.58	3.96	3.23-4.61
East Midlands	8.86	8.14-9.55	7.42	6.93-7.95	4.74	4.10-5.42
London	11.64	11.32-12.08	8.18	8.10-8.63	7.92	7.59-8.32
North East	10.84	10.51-11.37	9.19	8.97-9.60	4.77	4.29-5.49
North West	11.48	11.08-11.98	9.86	9.56-10.24	6.40	5.96-6.93
South East	6.40	5.82-7.07	5.24	4.84-5.72	4.03	3.45-4.64
South West	8.20	7.81-8.68	7.10	6.83-7.45	4.63	4.20-5.19
West Midlands	10.53	9.94-11.22	8.69	8.28-9.26	6.34	5.73-7.02
Yorkshire and the Humber	11.30	10.84-12.14	9.81	9.48-10.31	5.80	5.27-6.38
ENGLAND	9.41	9.27-9.64	7.69	7.58-7.90	5.53	5.36-5.75

TABLES 3 AND 4

The national prevalence rates by age group and region are shown in Table 3. The estimated numbers in each age group are shown in Table 4.

Table 3 shows that, nationally, the markedly highest prevalence rate is in the 25 to 34 age group. This was also the case across individual regions. The North East has the highest rate in this age group with just over 30 per thousand aged 25 to 34 years, followed closely by Yorkshire and the Humber with 28 per thousand. London has the highest prevalence rate in the 35 to 64 age range which, at just fewer than 11 per thousand, is much greater than the other regions. London also has the highest prevalence rate in the 15 to 24 age range, but, at just over 10 per thousand population, the prevalence rate is not much higher than that found in the North East.

TABLE 3: PROBLEM DRUG (OPIATE AND/OR CRACK COCAINE) USE PREVALENCE RATES PER THOUSAND POPULATION, BY AGE GROUP AND REGION WITH 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS

Region	15 to 24 years			25 to 34 years			35 to 64 years		
	Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI	
East of England	5.49	5.00	6.26	12.60	11.31	13.91	4.39	3.96	4.82
East Midlands	8.29	7.59	9.09	23.19	21.08	25.09	4.93	4.51	5.35
London	10.24	10.03	11.22	13.89	13.32	14.43	10.96	10.52	11.36
North East	10.22	9.81	11.18	30.52	29.19	31.91	5.41	5.20	5.75
North West	7.27	7.19	8.12	21.82	20.79	22.86	9.87	9.44	10.24
South East	6.65	6.07	7.96	13.19	11.76	14.36	4.33	3.85	4.81
South West	6.28	6.03	7.17	20.17	18.88	21.35	5.55	5.23	5.88
West Midlands	9.37	8.68	10.39	26.93	25.13	28.71	5.97	5.59	6.45
Yorkshire and the Humber	9.30	8.65	10.72	28.05	26.45	30.06	6.75	6.43	7.29
ENGLAND	8.03	8.02	8.53	19.25	18.80	19.67	6.66	6.52	6.81

TABLE 4: ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PROBLEM DRUG (OPIATE AND/OR CRACK COCAINE) USERS BY AGE GROUP AND REGION WITH 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS

Region	15 to 24 years			25 to 34 years			35 to 64 years		
	Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI	
East of England	3,863	3,514	4,400	8,785	7,883	9,699	10,223	9,237	11,234
East Midlands	5,023	4,595	5,504	12,097	10,995	13,086	8,915	8,163	9,690
London	10,315	10,104	11,304	20,733	19,888	21,548	31,720	30,443	32,874
North East	3,710	3,558	4,056	9,122	8,726	9,537	5,649	5,428	6,000
North West	6,997	6,916	7,812	17,855	17,013	18,705	27,202	26,003	28,231
South East	7,043	6,426	8,428	13,262	11,825	14,439	14,787	13,158	16,461
South West	4,215	4,046	4,816	11,588	10,847	12,261	11,746	11,055	12,441
West Midlands	6,865	6,360	7,614	17,449	16,283	18,605	12,812	11,986	13,839
Yorkshire and the Humber	7,114	6,619	8,196	18,250	17,212	19,561	13,890	13,221	15,002
ENGLAND	55,145	55,104	58,618	129,141	126,101	131,926	136,943	134,091	140,083

Overall in 2008-09 there were an estimated 321,229 problem drug users in England; in 2006-07 it was 328,767. The slight changes between the two sweeps of the study were within the margins of error around the estimates, and so are not statistically significant and do not represent a real decrease. However, there was a significant decrease in the national estimate of opiate users between the two sweeps. There was an increase in the levels of crack cocaine use; however, that increase was not statistically significant.

TABLE 5: NATIONAL ESTIMATES OF PROBLEM DRUG USE 2006-07 (SWEEP 3) AND 2008-09 (SWEEP 5) BY TOTAL PROBLEM DRUG USE, OPIATE USE AND CRACK COCAINE USE

	Sweep 3: 2006-07			Sweep 5: 2008-09		
	Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI	
Total problem drug use	328,767	322,128	340,196	321,229	316,684	329,025
Opiate	273,123	268,530	283,560	262,428	258,782	268,517
Crack	180,618	175,823	189,442	188,697	182,894	196,506

*↓ (Opiate row)

TABLE 6

Table 6 shows that there have been fluctuations in the estimates of problem drug users across the regions from sweep 3 to sweep 5. However, there was only one region with a statistically significant difference: the North East with a significant increase.[1]

TABLE 6: ESTIMATED NUMBER OF PROBLEM DRUG (OPIATE AND/OR CRACK COCAINE) USERS BY REGION IN 2006–07 (SWEEP 3) AND 2008-09 (SWEEP 5)

Region	Sweep 3: 2006-07 Estimate	95% CI		Sweep 5: 2008-09 Estimate	95% CI		Difference Estimate	95% CI	
East of England	19,726	16,349	23,635	22,871	20,725	25,243	3,145	-1,177	7,616
East Midlands	24,456	21,709	27,387	26,034	23,904	28,059	1,578	-2,181	5,273
London	74,822	72,742	77,873	62,769	61,065	65,168	-12,053	-15,411	-9,029
North East	15,823	15,421	16,832	18,480	17,912	19,392	2,657	1,467	3,579
North West	55,495	52,729	59,430	52,055	50,263	54,344	-3,440	-7,782	358
South East	30,309	26,669	34,607	35,092	31,895	38,777	4,783	-625	9,891
South West	29,831	27,793	32,387	27,549	26,231	29,178	-2,282	-5,284	175
West Midlands	38,235	34,922	41,854	37,125	35,053	39,579	-1,110	-5,358	3,449
Yorkshire and the Humber	40,070	37,866	42,811	39,254	37,634	42,154	-816	-3,980	2,869
ENGLAND	328,767	322,128	340,196	321,229	316,684	329,025	-7,538	-20,150	2,463

*↑ (North East row)

[1] Population density was not used as an indicator in Sweep 5 but was used in the previous sweeps. The decrease in London will be due in part to the exclusion of population density as an indicator. The inclusion of this indicator appears to inflate some London DAT estimates derived using the multiple indicator method; further detail of this can be found in the report www.nta.nhs.uk/facts-prevalence.aspx. The impact of this exclusion on the national estimates was less than half of one per cent.

TABLE 7

Table 7 compares the age-specific opiate and/or crack cocaine estimates between sweep 3 and sweep 5. There were decreases in the 15 to 24 age group and the 25 to 34 age group estimates. Both were statistically significant. There was, however, a statistically significant increase in the number of opiate and/or crack cocaine users in the older 35 to 64 age group. While an increase of approximately 8,000 problem drug users in that age group may initially appear strange, it should be noted that, if there are just under an estimated 140,000 opiate and/or crack cocaine users in the 25 to 34 age group, then it could reasonably be assumed that there could be approximately 28,000 opiate and/or crack cocaine users who would be aged 34 in sweep 3 but 35 or 36 in sweep 5. Thus the increase of about 8,000 in the older age group is likely to be due to an ageing drug using population, rather than people over the age of 34 beginning to use drugs such as opiates or crack cocaine.

TABLE 7: NATIONAL ESTIMATES OF PROBLEM DRUG USE 2006-07 (SWEEP 3) AND 2008-09 (SWEEP 5) BY AGE GROUP

	Sweep 3: 2006-07			Sweep 5: 2008-09			Difference			
	Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI		Estimate	95% CI		
15 to 24	60,672	59,245	63,598	55,145	55,104	58,618	-5,527	-7,516	-1,599	*↓
25 to 34	139,284	136,139	144,344	129,141	126,101	131,926	-10,143	-16,344	-6,269	*↓
35 to 64	128,810	125,982	133,641	136,943	134,091	140,083	8,133	2,307	11,990	*↑

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results presented here are from the fifth sweep of a project that used indirect techniques to produce the best possible estimates of an important and very hard to reach group. They show that the national estimate of problem drug use has remained stable between 2006-07 and 2008-09 and there has been a decrease in opiate use over this time. They also show a marked difference in prevalence rates across the nine regions.

Further results and a detailed explanation of the methodology used to produce these estimates can be found here – www.nta.nhs.uk/facts-prevalence.aspx

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