

Drug-related deaths in Highland

2023 Briefing Paper



1. Introduction

In July 2024 National Records of Scotland (NRS) published statistics on drug-related deaths registered in Scotland during 2023. Information is available for each local authority and health board on the overall trend, age at death, underlying cause of death and the type of drugs implicated in, or which potentially contributed to, the death. This paper summarises the main results of deaths for the Highland Alcohol and Drugs Partnership (HADP) area and is based on Highland Council residents.

2. Key Points

- 26 drug-related deaths were registered in Highland in 2023, a decrease of 16 deaths on 2022;
- The annual average number of deaths for the five-year period 2019-2023 is 32, an increase of 18 (129 percent) on the 2009-2013 average of 14 deaths;
- Highland has a drug-related death rate of 0.15 per 1,000 population, which is significantly lower than the national death rate of 0.24 per 1,000 population. Drug-related deaths in Highland have a slightly younger profile compared to those for Scotland as a whole;
- In 2023, one or more opiates or opioids contributed to 22 out of 26 deaths (85 percent); benzodiazepines were implicated in 15 deaths (58 percent), dihydrocodeines in 10 deaths (38 percent), heroin or morphine in 7 deaths (27 percent) and methadone in 6 deaths (23 percent);
- The most common underlying cause of death in 2023 was accidental poisoning (20 deaths, 77 percent), with 5 deaths (19 percent) classified as intentional self-poisoning;
- People in the most deprived areas of Scotland are more than 15 times as likely to die from a drug related death compared to people in the least deprived areas. The association of deprivation with drug related deaths is much greater than with other causes of death.

3. Drug-related deaths – terminology and data

The National Records of Scotland (NRS) produce an annual publication that provides statistics of ‘drug-misuse deaths’ which were registered in Scotland and uses an established definition based upon the cause of death identified on death registrations and information supplied by forensic pathologists.

In previous years, this definition has been referred to within the NRS report as ‘drug-related deaths’ or ‘the baseline definition’. Starting with the publication for 2021, the NRS report has referred to these as ‘drug misuse deaths’. To avoid a move towards the use of stigmatising language, HADP continue to use the term ‘drug-related deaths’ where nationally NRS refer to ‘drug misuse deaths’. *Language Matters* was developed jointly between NHS Highland and HADP and provides guidance regarding communicating about people, alcohol and drugs.¹ For this briefing and any local reporting of national and local figures by Highland ADP, the term ‘drug-misuse deaths’ has been replaced throughout by ‘drug-related deaths’ unless explicitly stated otherwise.

For Highland these data report upon deaths registered during 2023 of either Highland Council area residents or persons of no fixed abode who died in Highland. Full details of the definitions and methods are available in the national report and NRS website.^{2,3}

4. Highland Numbers

Unlike many other areas in Scotland there has been a decrease in the number of drug-related deaths in Highland in 2023. There were 26 drug-related deaths registered in 2023 compared to 42 in 2022, a decrease of 16 deaths.

The numbers of drug related deaths each year are statistically relatively small in Highland and this means they are subject to year on year fluctuations, as shown in Figure 1. A more reliable indication of the longer-term trends is provided by using 5-year annual averages, which ‘smooth out’ the effects of annual variation.

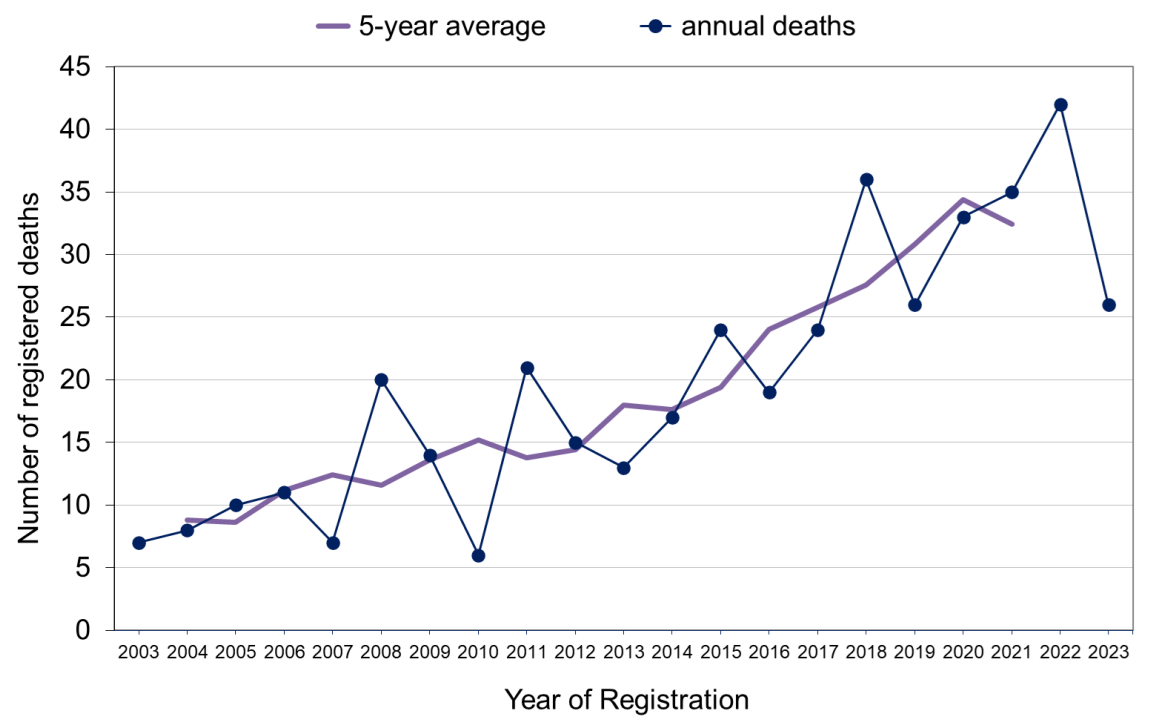
Comparing the annual average for the five-year period 2019-2023 (32 deaths) with that for 2009-2013 (14 deaths) shows that the number of drug-related deaths has increased by 18 (129 percent). The thick solid line in Figure 1 shows that the overall trend in drug related mortality in Highland has been increasing, most significantly over the last decade, with a decrease in the most recent five-year period.

¹ *Language Matters: communicating about people, alcohol, and drugs* (2021)
<https://www.highlandsubstanceawareness.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Language-Matters.pdf>

² National Records of Scotland *Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2023*; (2024)
<https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/vital-events/deaths/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland/2023>

³ National Records Scotland *Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2023 - Methodological Annexes* (2024); <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/statistics-by-theme/vital-events/deaths/drug-related-deaths-in-scotland/2023/methodological-annexes>

Figure 1. Number of drug-related deaths for Highland Council area, annual number and 5 year annual moving averages; 2003 to 2023



Source: National Records of Scotland

5. Comparison with Scotland

The number of drug-related deaths in Highland can be compared with those nationally by expressing the average number of deaths as a rate per 1,000 population. Using the average annual number of deaths for 2019-2023, Highland has a death rate of 0.15 per 1,000 population (Table 1). The Highland rate is below the national average of 0.24 per 1,000 population and is sixth lowest of the thirty-one council areas reported in Scotland.

Further indication of drug-related death rates can be made relative to prevalence estimates of the number of people that are of increased risk due to problem drug use. Public Health Scotland have released statistics which are in development based on a new methodology for estimating the prevalence of opioid dependence in Scotland.⁴ Findings are limited to Scotland and three selected health board areas with further developments underway to provide estimates for other areas. Initial findings estimate in 2019/20, the number of people with opioid dependence in Scotland was 47,100 (95% Credible Interval (CrI) 45,700 to 48,600). This represents an estimated prevalence of 1.32% (95% CrI: 1.28% to 1.37%) of 15 to 64 year-olds.

There is a greatly increased risk of drug-related death for people living in the most deprived areas of Scotland who are more than 15 times as likely to die from a drug related death compared to people in the least deprived areas. The association of deprivation with drug related deaths is much greater than with other causes of death.

⁴ Public Health Scotland *Estimated Prevalence of Opioid Dependence in Scotland* (2024); <https://publichealthscotland.scot/media/26285/2024-03-19-opioid-prevalence-report.pdf>

Table 1: Drug-related deaths: annual average number and rate per 1,000 population

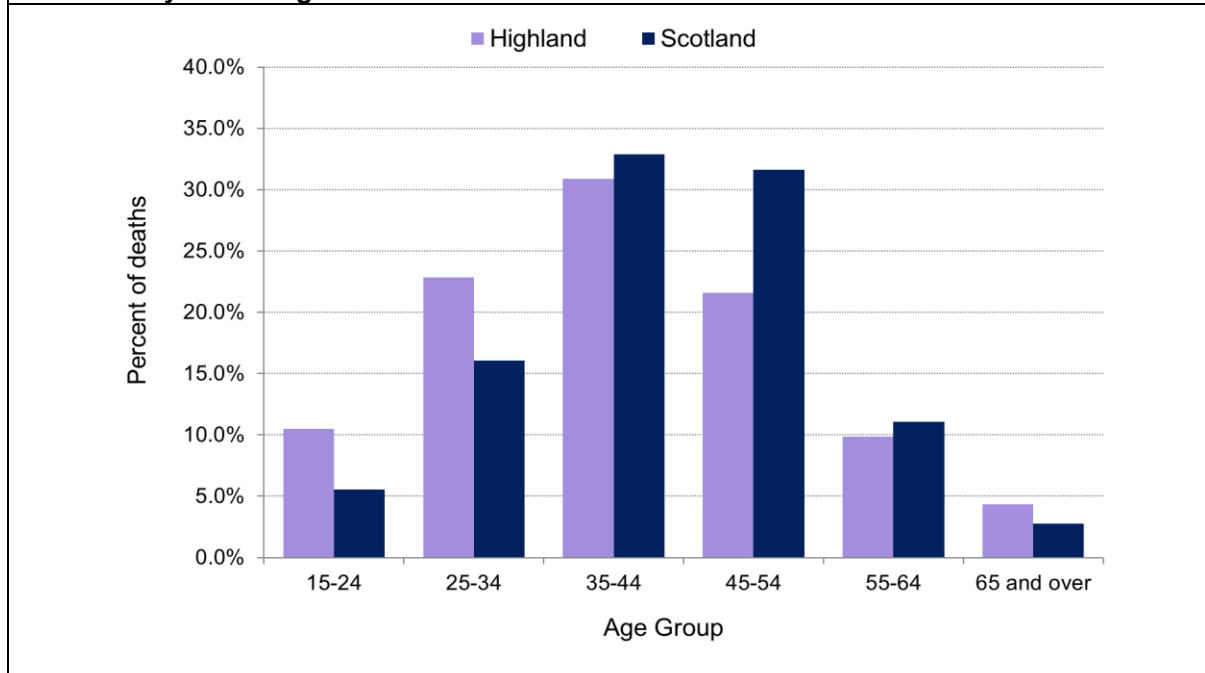
	Average annual deaths 2009-2013	Average annual deaths 2019-2023	Rate per 1,000 population 2009-2013	Rate per 1,000 population 2019-2023
Highland	14	32	0.06	0.15
Scotland	554	1234	0.10	0.24

Source: National Records of Scotland

6. Age at Death

Between 2019 and 2023 there were 17 drug-related deaths of people aged 15-24 (10 percent of all deaths), 37 in the 25-34 year age group (23 percent), 50 in the 35-44 age group (31 percent) and 58 deaths of people aged 45 and over (36 percent). Figure 2 shows that while there is a lower rate per 1,000 deaths in Highland compared to the national rate (0.15 and 0.24 respectively) there is a higher proportion of deaths in the 15-24 and 25-34 age groups in Highland and a lower percentage of deaths in the 45-54 age groups compared to the national profile. This illustrates that drug-related deaths in Highland have a slightly younger profile compared to those for Scotland as a whole.

Figure 2: Drug-related deaths per 1,000 population and age group, Highland and Scotland; 5-year average 2019-2023



Source: National Records of Scotland

The age-specific rate of drug-related deaths for Highland compared to Scotland is shown in Table 2. Highland drug-related mortality in the 35-44 age group is lower than that of the overall Scotland rate; 0.36 per 1,000 population compared to 0.60 per 1,000 population. Similarly, the Highland drug-related mortality in the 45-54 age group is less than half that of the overall Scotland rate; 0.21 per 1,000 population compared to 0.53 per 1,000 population.

Table 2: Age specific drug-related deaths per 1,000 population, total for 2019 to 2023

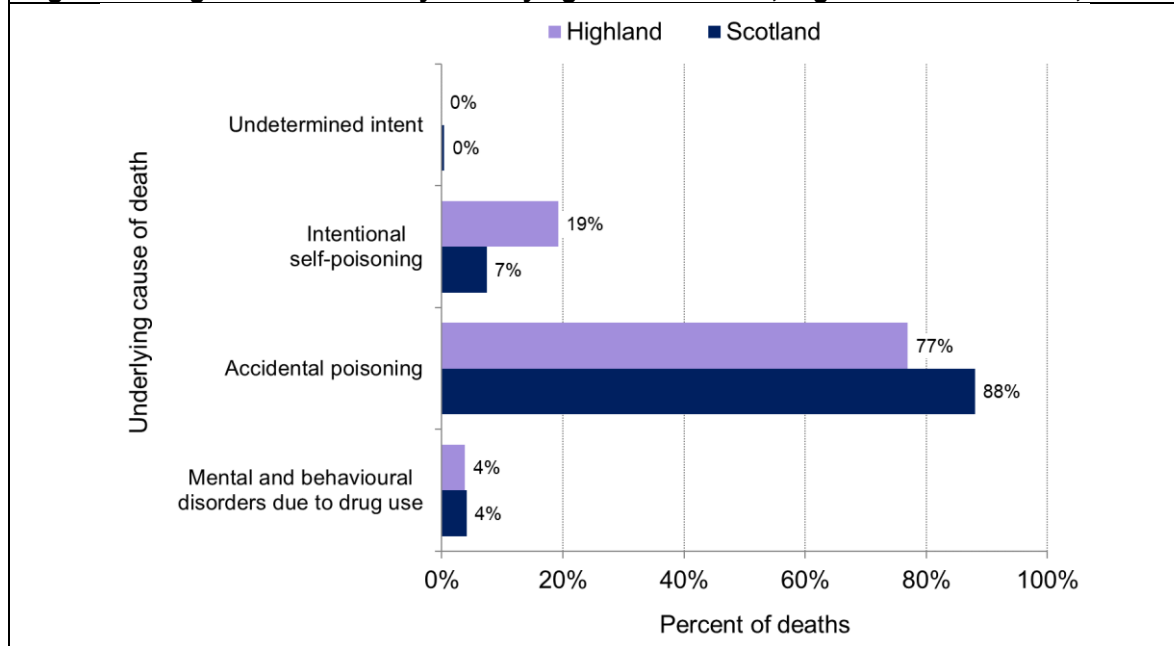
Age Group	Highland			Scotland		
	Deaths	Percent	Rate per 1,000	Deaths	Percent	Rate per 1,000
15-24	17	10%	0.15	343	6%	0.10
25-34	37	23%	0.29	990	16%	0.28
35-44	50	31%	0.36	2029	33%	0.60
45-54	35	22%	0.21	1953	32%	0.53
55-64	16	10%	0.08	684	11%	0.17
All ages	162	100%	0.15	6172	100%	0.24

Source: National Records of Scotland

7. Underlying cause of death

The underlying cause of death is reported by a standard set of diagnostic groupings based upon International Classification of Diseases Tenth Revision (ICD-10) codes. Figure 4 shows that during 2023 just over three quarters of deaths in Highland (20 deaths, 77 percent) were attributed to accidental poisoning. These are deaths where a drug listed under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) was found to be present in the body at the time of death, even if it did not directly contribute to the outcome. There were 5 deaths (19 percent) classified as intentional self-poisoning and these deaths may also be reported nationally as suicides. These deaths may not be considered by the local drug death review group that identifies lessons to be learned from individual deaths.

Figure 4: Drug-related deaths by underlying cause of death, Highland and Scotland, 2023



Source: National Records of Scotland

8. Drugs reported in deaths

The type of drug either implicated in, or potentially contributing to, drug-related deaths in Highland between 2019 and 2023 is shown in Table 3. In 2023 benzodiazepines were implicated in 15 deaths (58 percent), dihydrocodeines in 10 deaths (38 percent), heroin or morphine in 7 deaths (27 percent) and methadone in 6 deaths (23 percent).

Table 3: Number of Drug-related deaths by selected drugs implicated, Highland, 2019 to 2023

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
All drug-related deaths	26	33	35	42	26
Any opiate or opioid	23	31	30	31	22
- Heroin and/or morphine	10	11	10	14	7
- Methadone	9	12	14	12	6
- Buprenorphine	18	21	4	0	1
- Codeine or a codeine-containing compound	3	4	4	3	2
- Dihydrocodeine or d.h.c-containing compound	3	13	11	8	10
- Nitazenes	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0
Benzodiazepines	14	26	22	17	15
- any "Prescribable" benzodiazepine	10	25	15	12	11
- Diazepam	10	23	12	11	8
- any "Street" benzodiazepine	9	13	17	8	9
- Etizolam	14	26	22	17	15
- Bromazolam	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	7
Gabapentin and/or Pregabalin	5	16	15	5	11
Cocaine	7	3	7	14	11
Ecstasy-type	0	0	0	2	0
Amphetamines	1	6	5	3	1
Alcohol	5	4	6	2	2
Source: National Records of Scotland					
Notes:					
1. More than one drug may be reported per death.					
2. The format of the published <i>NRS Table C3: Drug misuse deaths by selected drugs implicated and council area</i> changed in 2023. Data for years preceding 2023 are not available in some categories.					

A comparison across the five year time period from 2019 and 2023 shows that one or more opiates or opioids were present in the majority of cases; 23 out of 26 deaths in 2019 and 22 out of 26 deaths in 2023 (85 percent). Buprenorphine has been implicated in a very small number of deaths since 2021 compared with previous figures; 18 out of 26 deaths in 2019 and 21 out of 33 deaths in 2020. Deaths in which Nitazenes were implicated are newly reported from 2023; no deaths were reported for Highland compared with 23 deaths (2 percent) nationally. Dihydrocodeine compounds have contributed to an increasing proportion of deaths over the five year period rising from 3 deaths (11 percent) in 2019 to 10 deaths (38 percent) in 2023.

The number of deaths associated with methadone and benzodiazepines have shown slight variation across this five year period. Deaths in which Bromazolam were implicated are newly reported from 2023; 7 deaths (27 percent) were reported for Highland compared with 426 deaths (36 percent) nationally.

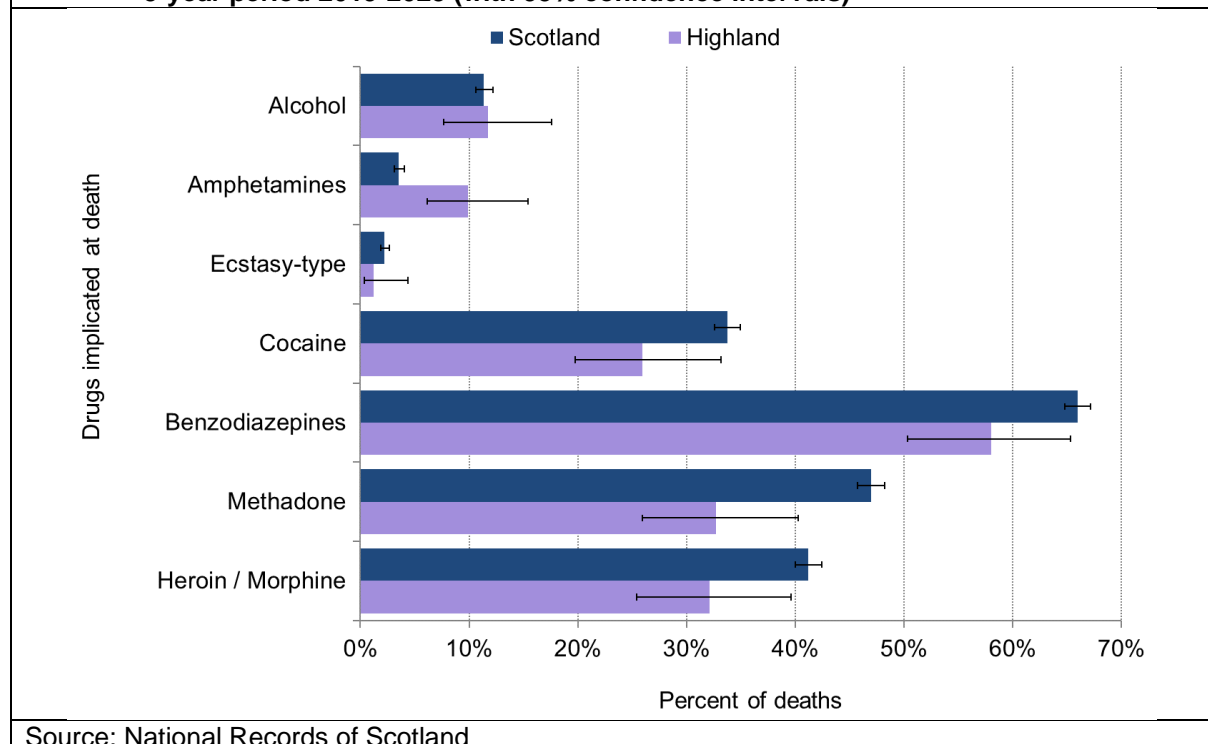
In 2023, cocaine was implicated in 11 deaths in Highland and this reflects an increasing trend which sees cocaine implicated in two fifths of deaths both locally and nationally.

Gabapentin and/or Pregabalin contributed to 11 out of 26 deaths in 2023 and previously 5 out of 42 deaths in 2022.

Some caution must be made in interpreting figures for a single year however they do provide important intelligence for local drug trends.

The type of drugs implicated in, or potentially contributing to, drug-related deaths in Highland can be compared with those nationally using the average annual deaths for 2019-2023 (Figure 5). Over the five-year period there have been significantly fewer deaths in Highland where methadone and heroin or morphine was reported and more deaths where amphetamines was reported compared to Scotland.

Figure 5: Drug-related deaths by selected drugs reported, Highland and Scotland, 5-year period 2019-2023 (with 95% confidence intervals)



New psychoactive substances (NPSs) are drugs which have been made to mimic the effects of illegal substances such as cocaine or ecstasy. These drugs have become more common in recent years, and many have also now become controlled. Information about NPSs is only available nationally and in 2023, there were 550 drug related deaths where controlled NPSs were implicated. The majority of NPSs involved were benzodiazepines, for example, bromazolam.

Further detail is provided in the National Records of Scotland Report.

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