

# Drug misuse in England and Wales: implications for family law



Substance misuse continues to play a significant role in family law proceedings, influencing decisions around safeguarding, parenting capacity and contact arrangements.

The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) data (*11 December 2025, ONS website, article, Drug misuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2025*) confirms that drug use remains widespread, with millions of adults reporting recent use.

Although overall prevalence has remained broadly stable, the scale of misuse and changing profile of substances involved continue to present challenges for courts, reinforcing the need for proportionate, evidence-based drug testing in family proceedings.

## The headline figures

The latest ONS figures underline the continued prevalence of drug misuse across England and Wales.

For the year ending March 2025:

- 8.7% of adults aged 16-59 (approx. 2.9m people) reported using an illegal drug in the previous 12 months
- Among younger adults aged 16-24, prevalence was significantly higher at 15.1%

While these levels have not increased markedly, they have also failed to decline, indicating that drug misuse remains a persistent issue.

For family courts, this translates into a steady flow of cases where historic or ongoing drug use must be carefully assessed.

## Beyond stereotypes

The ONS data also challenges long-standing assumptions about who is most likely to misuse drugs. While younger adults continue to report the highest levels of use, there have been increases among older age groups (e.g. aged 45-54).

This shift is significant for family law, where substance misuse may arise in cases involving older parents or carers.

Socio-economic trends further complicate the picture, with higher rates of Class A drug use reported among higher-income households, undermining assumptions that serious drug misuse is confined to economically deprived groups.

For legal practitioners, these findings reinforce the importance of avoiding assumptions based on age, income or lifestyle. Instead, objective, court-admissible drug testing remains essential to accurately assess risk and safeguarding concerns.

## Which substances are driving risk

Established substances continue to dominate patterns of misuse.

- Cannabis remains the most used drug, with over 6.5% of 16-59-year-olds using it in the past year, and over a third using it daily
- Cocaine and ecstasy also remain prevalent
- Ketamine use has shown a gradual but consistent increase

However, prevalence data alone does not fully reflect the complexity encountered in family law cases. In practice, courts are increasingly dealing with misuse of

controlled prescription medications, New Psychoactive Substances and poly-drug combinations, many of which are not routinely included in standard testing panels.

This is particularly relevant where substances are taken without full awareness of their composition, or where prescribed drugs are misused, complicating disclosure and risk assessment.

## Implications for drug testing in family proceedings

Reliance on standard testing panels alone no longer provides a sufficiently accurate picture of an individual's substance use, particularly where non-standard drugs or poly-drug use are involved.

In family proceedings, a narrow testing scope may fail to identify habitual or problematic use outside standard panels.

Additionally, symptoms of drug use often overlap across different substances, meaning that symptoms alone cannot be used to determine which drugs to test for.

## Accredited drug testing for legal matters

Drug misuse remains a persistent feature of life in England and Wales, with patterns of use that are broad and increasingly complex. As drug use diversifies, testing strategies must evolve accordingly.

At AlphaBiolabs, we test for the widest range of substances at our UK-based, UKAS 17025-accredited laboratory (Lab 51 extension for toxicology), including cannabis, cocaine, opiates, ecstasy/MDMA, ketamine, pregabalin, gabapentin, methadone, tramadol, benzodiazepines, hallucinogens, synthetic cannabinoids (e.g. Spice), and a wide range of emerging drugs.

*To request a quote, contact our New Enquiry team on 0333 600 1300 / testing@alphabiolabs.com or complete our online quote form [www.alphabiolabs.co.uk/legal-test-forms/](http://www.alphabiolabs.co.uk/legal-test-forms/).*

### Marie Law, Director of Toxicology at AlphaBiolabs



A highly-skilled and respected scientist with over 15 years' experience in the field of forensics, Marie joined AlphaBiolabs in 2022 and oversees the company's growing toxicology team.

As Director of Toxicology, Marie's day-to-day responsibilities include maintaining the highest quality testing standards for toxicology and further enhancing AlphaBiolabs' drug and alcohol testing services for the legal sector, members of the public, and the workplace sector.

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