



Reading Between the White Lines: An Investigation into Cocaine-Related Harm in Ireland During Periods of Economic Change and Crisis, 2004-2024

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Introduction

Ireland's economy recovered. Cocaine harm didn't.

Between 2013 and 2024, as Ireland experienced one of the most sustained economic recoveries in its modern history.

How did economic cycles shape cocaine-related harm in Ireland from 2004 to 2024, and did austerity and pro-cyclical funding amplify the crisis?

Objective

To investigate patterns in treatment demand, employment and accommodation status, and gender distribution across four distinct economic periods; to examine how policy decisions during austerity created the conditions for the post-2013 surge; and to **inform local and national government policy.**

Methodology

Design: Mixed-methods analysis.

Quantitative Data: Annual data (2004-2024) from the **Health Research Board's National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS)**, Central Statistics Office, and European Union Drugs Agency.

Qualitative Data: Testimony from **frontline service providers, advocacy groups, academic experts, and political representatives.**

Data & Trends



Pre-Crash Boom (2004-2007)

Unemployment averaged ~4.5%. Cocaine treatment cases rose from 366 to 788 (+115%). One-third were in regular employment. Homelessness was low at 4.3%. **Women were only 16% of cases. Crack cocaine was virtually absent (<2%).** "Ireland was at the beginning of a 10-year cocaine epidemic." - A&E Consultant, 2007.



Recession & Austerity (2008-2012)

Unemployment soared from 6.0% to 15.9%. **Regular employment among cocaine treatment seekers collapsed to 15-19%. Institutionalisation, prison and residential care, soared to over 20%.** Heroin purity fell from 30-50% to 3-5%, pushing some users toward cocaine. "The recession reduced the visibility of the Irish drug market." - Dr. James Windle, UCC.



The Recovery (2013-2019)

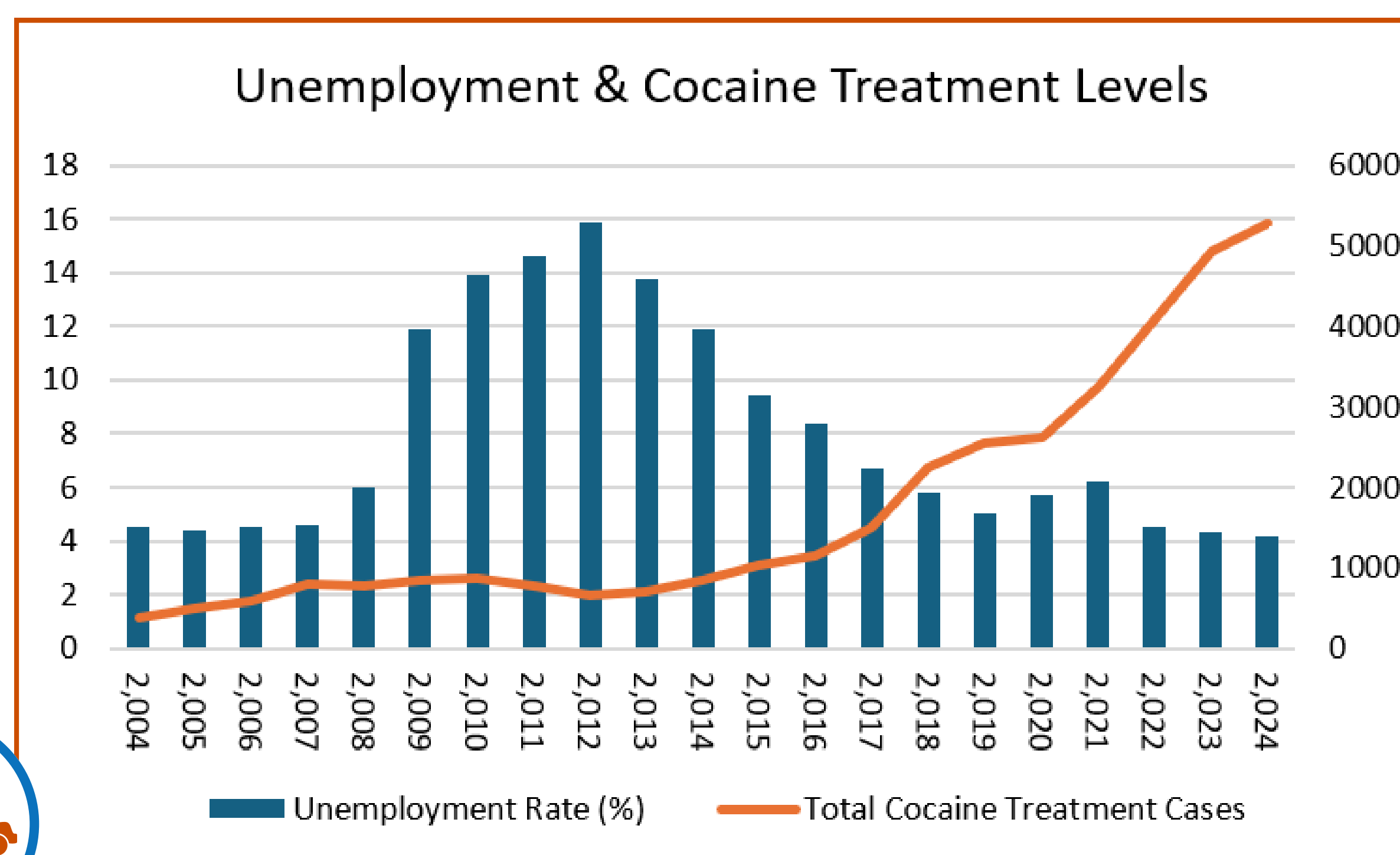
General unemployment fell from 13.8% to 5.0%. **Cocaine treatment cases rose from 708 to 2,560 (+262%).** But unemployment among cocaine treatment seekers remained **above 50%**. Homelessness reached 5.7% by 2019. Crack cocaine cases rose from 173 to 460 (+166%). "A 'double whammy' of frozen budgets and a massive expansion in workload."

- LDATF

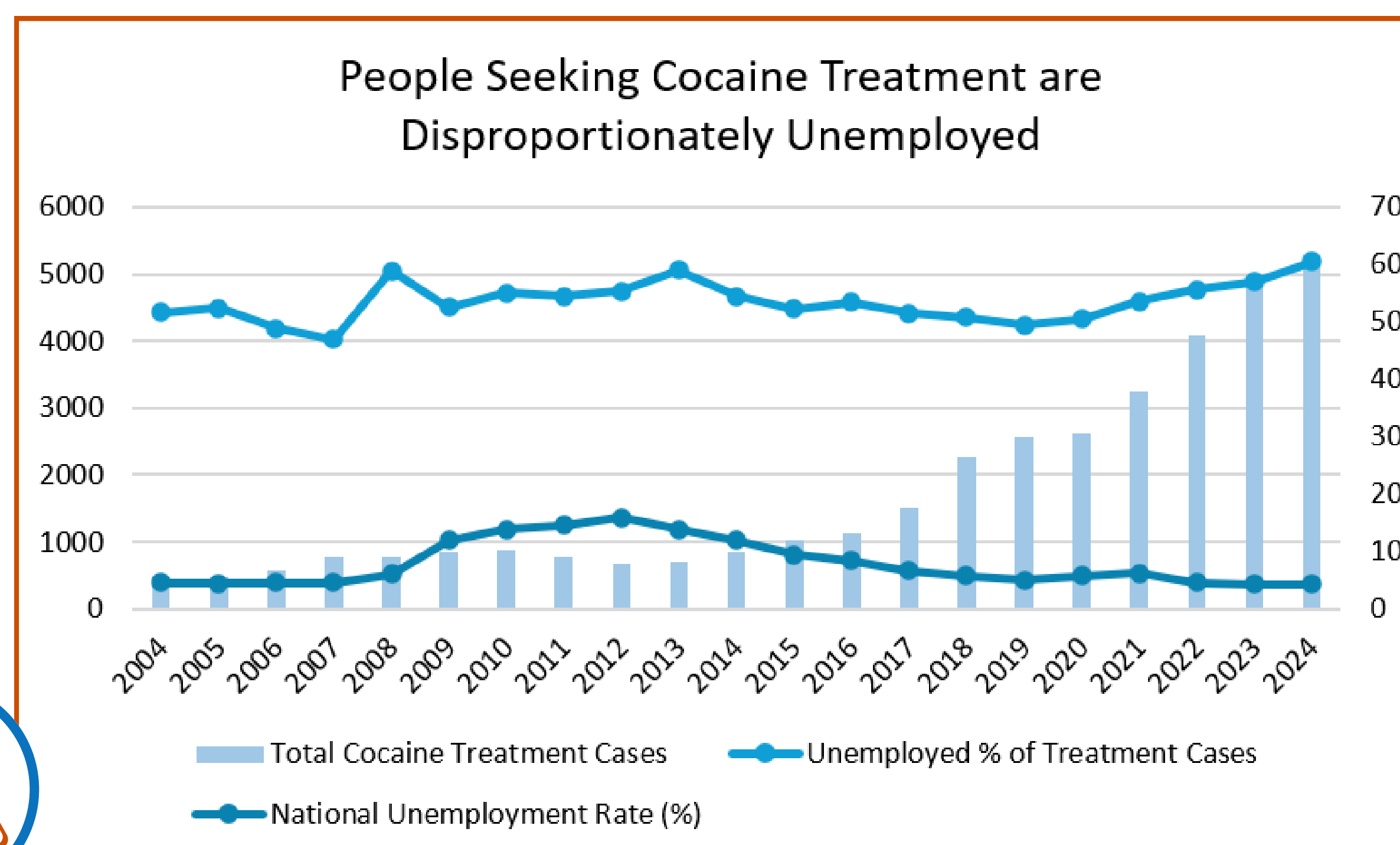
Post-COVID (2020-2024)



General unemployment fell to 4.2% by 2024. **Cocaine treatment demand reached 5,289 cases; a 694% increase from the 2012 trough. Unemployment among cocaine treatment seekers hit 60.2%, homelessness reached 9-10%, and regular employment fell to 30.9%.** Total treatment cases rose from 8,922 in 2017 to 13,104 in 2023; a 46.8% increase. Cocaine was implicated in 115 drug poisoning deaths in 2022; 33.5% of all such deaths. "It's impossible for people to get themselves together... if they don't know where they are going to sleep at night." - Tony Geoghegan, MQI.



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Policy Recommendations

In my engagement with the Minister of State at the Department of Health, with special responsibility for Public Health, Well Being and the **National Drugs Strategy**, I stressed six priorities, supported by my quantitative and qualitative research:

1. Multi-annual, inflation-linked funding for addiction services;
2. Integrated housing-first treatment modelled on Finland and Scotland;
3. Dedicated crack cocaine services, including women-only, trauma-informed, low-threshold harm reduction;
4. Restoration of community networks to the National Drugs Strategy steering group;
5. Real-time HRB monitoring of employment and accommodation among cocaine treatment seekers; and
6. Urgent implementation of the Citizens' Assembly's 36 recommendations.

Conclusion

Ireland's recovery did not reduce cocaine-related harm, it amplified it. This was not inevitable. **It was the predictable result of political choices: a 79% cut to Local Drug and Alcohol Taskforce funding, a 93% cut in Dublin 12, and the systematic dismantling of community addiction services.** By 2024, **six in ten** cocaine users entering treatment were unemployed and nearly one in ten were homeless. Women's treatment numbers rose almost **seven-fold since 2017**, driven by a **906% increase in crack cocaine cases.** The state cut services during austerity and rebuilt them too slowly during recovery, so demand surged into a broken system. Reading between the white lines means seeing what official statistics hide: austerity did not just cut services; it destroyed lives. The data is clear; the choice has been political.

Full Report



KEY SOURCES
Health Research Board, Central Statistics Office, European Union Drugs Agency.
Comiskey, O'Sullivan & Milnes (2012); Boyle et al. (2014); Windle (2018); Mongan et al. (2025); Millar & Mongan (2025); O'Mahony (2025); Department of Health (2016); Oireachtas (2015); Public Health Scotland (2024); SICAD (2024).