



Ruby Rose Lawlor - Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Drugs

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to present today. My name is Ruby Rose Lawlor, Executive Director of Youth RISE, an international network of young people who use drugs and those affected by drug policies. We advocate for evidence-based, rights-centered approaches that prioritise health and well-being while addressing the structural conditions that shape vulnerability.

We work globally, including within UN processes such as the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, as well as at regional and national levels, including previous engagement with this Committee.

It is with this background that I speak to you today about what it means to protect young people through a comprehensive approach to prevention. If our goal is to protect young people, it is important to recognise that current approaches are not fully achieving that objective. Ireland continues to experience high levels of drug-related harm, including rising overdose risks linked to an increasingly toxic and unpredictable drug supply.

The Citizens' Assembly has already provided a strong and comprehensive roadmap. I will focus on how we see these recommendations translate into effective protection in practice.

Recommendation 17 refers to a health-led approach to drug use and possession. Current criminalisation-based responses can contribute to harm rather than preventing it. They expose young people to criminal records, sanctions, and contact with the criminal justice system, while also creating barriers to accessing education, healthcare, and other essential support, not to mention facilitating stigma. These impacts can have long-term consequences for young people's development and life opportunities.

Ireland's own Garda Youth Diversion Scheme provides useful insight into the benefits of diverting young people away from the criminal justice system, with most participants not going on to reoffend. This demonstrates the value of supportive approaches; however, diversion alone does not address the broader structural drivers of harm.

In this context, a fully health-led approach would benefit from the removal of criminal penalties for possession for personal use, accompanied by strengthened health and social responses. International evidence from the 39 countries that have adopted some form of decriminalisation indicates that this does not lead to long term increased drug use, while it does improve health and social outcomes. This approach is also increasingly supported by international human rights bodies, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health. Consideration should also be given to addressing the long-term impacts of criminalisation, including pathways to expungement of past convictions.

Recommendations 2 and 4 highlight the importance of a whole-of-government and socio-economic approach. Drug-related harm does not occur in isolation- it is closely linked to poverty, inequality, and access to services. The Committee has already recognised the relationship between deprivation and drug-related harm.



This points to the importance of applying a “do no harm” principle across all relevant policy areas. Prevention, in this context, can be understood not only as preventing drug use, but as preventing harm by ensuring access to healthcare, harm reduction, housing, education, and employment.

To support this, we recommend consideration of Full Spectrum Harm Reduction as a comprehensive prevention approach. This is a person-centred and intersectional model that recognises the broader social and structural factors shaping health and well-being.

In practice, this approach combines healthcare with mental health support, legal assistance, education, and social protection. It also emphasises community- and peer-led responses, ensuring that young people are meaningfully involved in the design and delivery of services.

From this perspective, prevention and harm reduction are complementary rather than separate. Interventions such as overdose prevention and drug checking can be understood as essential components of a comprehensive prevention system.

We are also seeing similar integrated approaches emerging internationally. For example, in Brazil, prevention strategies increasingly bring together health, education, and social protection systems, rather than relying solely on deterrence-based models.

Overall, this suggests that effective prevention requires addressing the broader conditions that shape harm, rather than focusing solely on substance use itself.

Recommendation 28 calls for a comprehensive, age-appropriate prevention strategy. Current approaches are often abstinence-based and do not reflect the realities young people face.

A more effective approach would complement existing prevention efforts with harm reduction. This includes providing honest, evidence-based, and interactive education that supports young people to understand risks, respond to emergencies, and make informed decisions - whether that involves abstaining, reducing use, or adopting safer practices.

Such approaches can include practical components such as overdose response and naloxone, and can extend beyond school settings into communities, nightlife environments, and online spaces. Engaging parents, educators, and communities is also an important part of building a supportive prevention environment.

Evidence from multiple contexts shows that harm reduction-based education improves knowledge, risk awareness, and safety, without increasing drug use.

Recommendations 10 and 33 emphasise the importance of participation and evidence. Policies are more effective when they are informed by people who use drugs, including young people, and when they are supported by strong data systems.

At present, there are still barriers to meaningful participation of young people who use drugs, including stigma, limited youth-focused services, and resource constraints. This can result in policies that do not fully reflect the needs and realities of those most affected.



Strengthening mechanisms for meaningful participation, particularly through peer-led approaches, can improve both the relevance and effectiveness of responses. At the same time, strengthening data collection and research systems is essential to better understand trends, map services, and inform decision-making.

Finally, I would note that through our work with the Global Commission on Drug Policy and the Global Campus on Human Rights, we are currently developing a policy brief grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, based on consultations with children and young people globally. This will provide further evidence to support governments in aligning drug policy with children's rights.

In closing, Ireland is facing significant and evolving drug-related challenges, including an increasingly complex and risky drug market.

The Citizens' Assembly has provided a strong foundation for responding to these challenges. The evidence base is clear, and there is a growing body of international experience to draw from.

The key consideration now is how these recommendations can be implemented in a way that most effectively protects the health, well-being, and rights of young people.

Resources:

Youth RISE's Full Spectrum Harm Reduction (FSHR) Statement:

https://youthrise.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/FINAL_Statement_FSHR.pdf

Connecting theory and practice: Best practices of the Full Spectrum Harm Reduction Survey Report:

<https://youthrise.org/resources/connecting-theory-and-practice-best-practices-of-the-full-spectrum-harm-reduction-survey-report/>

Brazil Government Conference room paper on their Comprehensive Prevention System:

https://www.gov.br/mj-pt-br/assuntos/sua-protecao/politicas-sobre-drogas/subcapas-senad/PAPERVE_RSODIGITAL1.pdf

UN CND Side Event Report: "I wish they had told us how to be safe": Youth-Centred and Human Rights Compliant Drug Harm Reduction Education,:

<https://youthrise.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/68th-CND-SIDE-EVENT-Report-.pdf>

Research report: "I wish they had told us how to be safe" – Building a better drug education with young people:

<https://youthrise.org/resources/i-wish-they-had-told-us-how-to-be-safe-building-a-better-drug-education-with-young-people/>

Decriminalization of drug use in the context of HIV: a guidance note:

https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/documents/2026/20260310_Decriminalization-drug-use-HIV



Decriminalisation and Young People Who Use Drugs Rights report:

<https://youthrise.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Decriminalisation-and-Young-People-Who-Use-Drugs-Rights-Report.pdf>

Global Commission on Drug Policy Report: Beyond Punishment: From Criminal Justice Responses to Drug Policy Reform:

https://globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GCDP_Report2024_EN_forweb.pdf