

Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

Update to 31 December 2020

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The number of drug seizure incidents and drug-related arrests recorded by the police showed a mainly upwards trend between 2006/07 and 2019/20. Figures for the latest 12 months show a fall in both seizure incidents and arrests.

In 12 months from 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2020:

- There were 7,503 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 797 (9.6 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- Lower levels of seizure incidents were seen across each class of drugs.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by benzodiazepines (Class C) and cocaine (Class A).
- Eight policing districts showed a decrease in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,388 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 403 (10.6 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months.
- Nine policing districts showed a decrease in drug-related arrests, with Belfast City showing the largest decrease.



Northern Ireland
Statistics and Research Agency

Keeping People Safe



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We welcome comment and feedback on these statistics. If you would like to forward your views, receive notification of new publications or be kept informed of developments relating to PSNI statistics, please email your contact details using the email address provided on the cover page.

1. Things you need to know about this release

Coverage

This release is produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

Statistics on police recorded drug seizures and arrests in Northern Ireland are collated and produced by statisticians seconded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

This release presents provisional statistics relating to police recorded drug seizures and arrests to 31 December 2020. Figures were compiled on 21 January 2020; as of that date 95% of seizure incidents for April to December 2020 have been fully validated; 5% are fully/partly outstanding or are still awaiting FSNI confirmation. As seizure incidents continue to be processed, this will lead to an increase in the number of drug seizures recorded since April 2020, particularly for the most recent quarter October to December. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 31 March 2021 will be published in April/May 2021, date to be confirmed. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the PSNI website.

Drug Seizure Incidents

Statistics in this publication relate to incidents in which a drug controlled under the [Misuse of Drugs Act \(1971\)](#) (MDA) is seized, recovered or found by police. This includes drugs intercepted in the post and drugs which are handed in to the police.

Drug-Related Arrests

A drug-related arrest is counted when a person is arrested and processed through custody for one or more drug-related offences.

Points to be aware of

- As these statistics are based on drug seizures that have been recorded by the police, changes in the quantity and type of drugs seized, and also in the number of drug-related arrests, can be affected by police activity.
- Not all drug seizures are subject to forensic testing to officially confirm the drug type seized. When testing is not applied, the seized drugs are classified in accordance with the investigating officer's assessment of the drug type seized, based on their experience and knowledge of the illegal drug trade in Northern Ireland.
- Not all drug use will come to the attention of the police.
- These statistics should not themselves be considered a measure of drug prevalence in Northern Ireland. Other sources of information relating to drug misuse are provided in the [User Guide](#) which accompanies this publication, and may be considered alongside this publication to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the drug situation in Northern Ireland.
- Pregabalin and Gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019 and have been included in the drug seizure statistics from this date.

Points to note

Other Agency Seizures: Drugs seized by the Border Force are published quarterly by the Home Office as [Border Force transparency data](#), with Border Force seizures in each of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland presented separately.

Border Force and National Crime Agency seizures within Northern Ireland are not presented in this publication.

Recording Practice: Drug seizures often involve the seizure of multiple classes and types of drugs. This means that seizure figures for individual drug classes or types cannot be added together to produce totals, as this can exceed the overall number of seizures. Further details are available in the [User Guide](#).

Geographic breakdown: Seizure incidents and arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for approximately one third of all drug seizure incidents and nearly 40 per cent of drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West). To assist in the understanding of the statistics drug seizure incidents for Belfast City policing district have been captured at this geographic level from the start of 2016/17, while this breakdown is available for drug-related arrests from 2006/07.

2. What is happening to drug seizures over the longer term?

The number of drug seizure incidents has increased each year since 2006/07, with the exception of a slight fall in 2016/17. The level recorded in 2019/20 (8,186 seizure incidents) is more than three times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590 seizure incidents).

Figure 1 Trends in drug seizure incidents since 2006/07

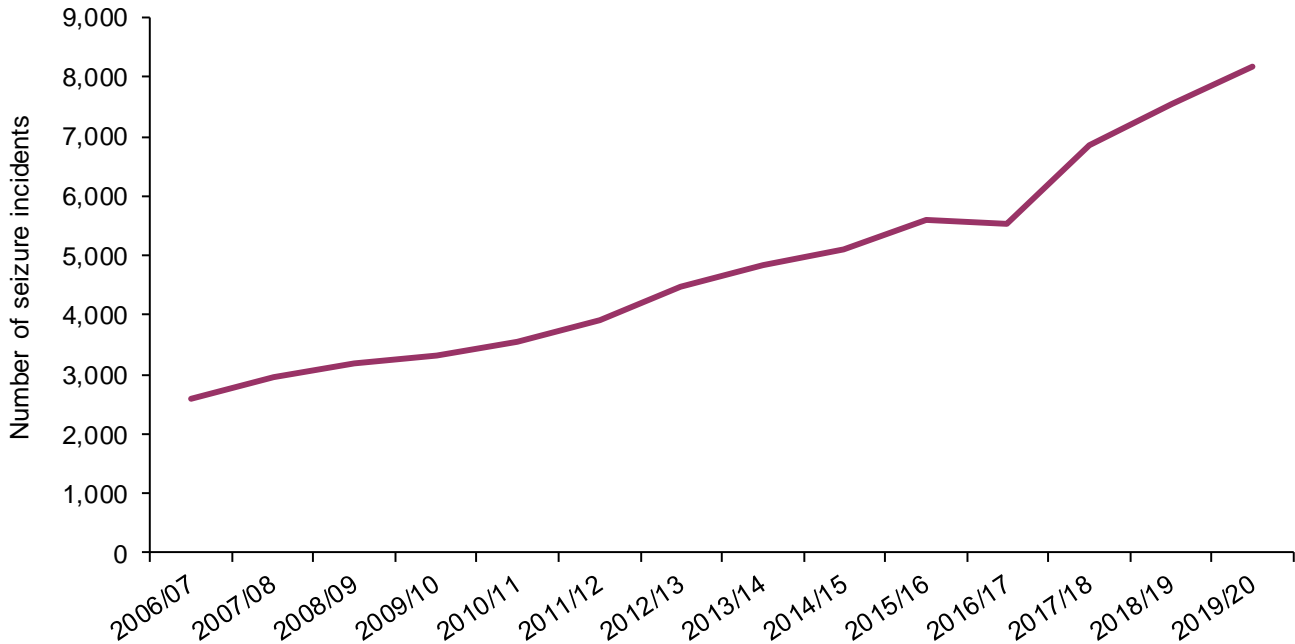
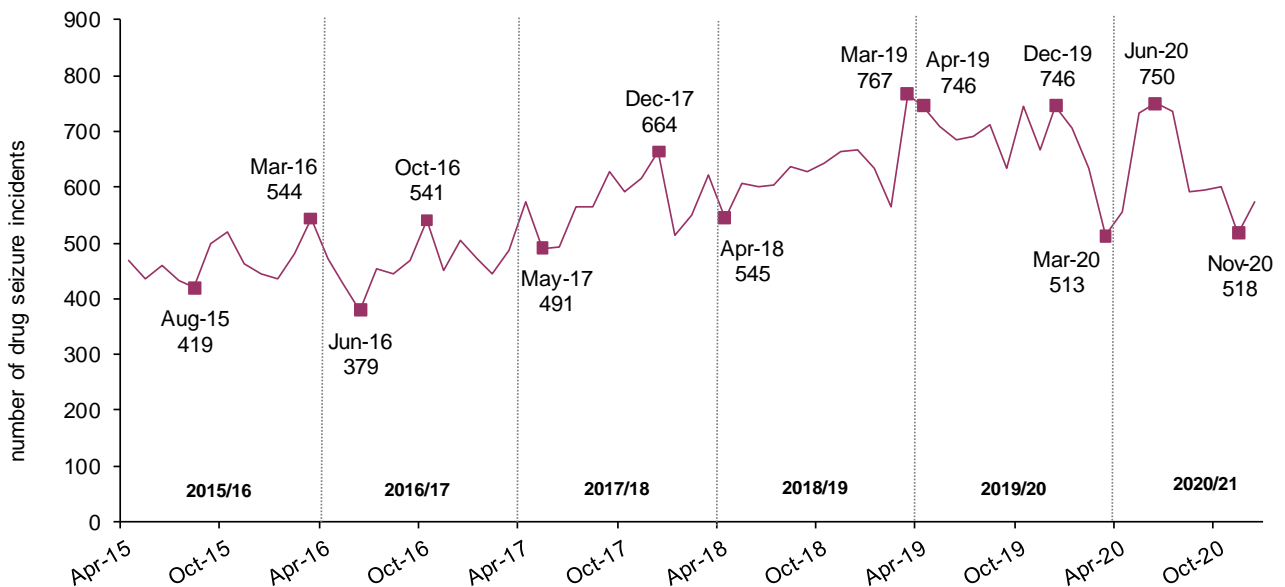


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2015. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures. For further information please refer to section 3 of this bulletin.

Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2015 to December 2020, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



More detailed information on drug seizure trends is available in the [Annual Trends report](#) on the PSNI website.

3. What has been happening to drug seizures more recently?

In the 12 months from 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2020:

- There were 7,503 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 797 (9.6 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 8,177 were recorded.
- Lower levels of seizure incidents were seen across each class of drugs.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by benzodiazepines (Class C) and cocaine (Class A). Figure 4 shows the change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized during the latest 12 months compared with the previous 12 months.
- Seizures of cannabis resin (Class B) fell from 637 to 134 (79.0 per cent). Most other cannabis formats also saw a decrease in numbers of recorded seizures except plants which had a slight increase.
- The lower levels of drug seizure incidents seen in March and April may have been impacted by the lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 that were introduced on 23rd March 2020. Between March and September the trend in drug seizure incidents since the lockdown measures were introduced is similar to that seen for the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period. (Figure 12, [Police recorded crime update to 31st December 2020](#)). Please note that as seizure incidents continue to be processed, this will lead to an increase in the number of drug seizures recorded since April 2020, particularly for the most recent quarter October to December.

Details of the quantities of each drug type seized are available in Tables 4 and 5 of the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

Figure 3 Drug seizure incidents January 2019 to December 2020

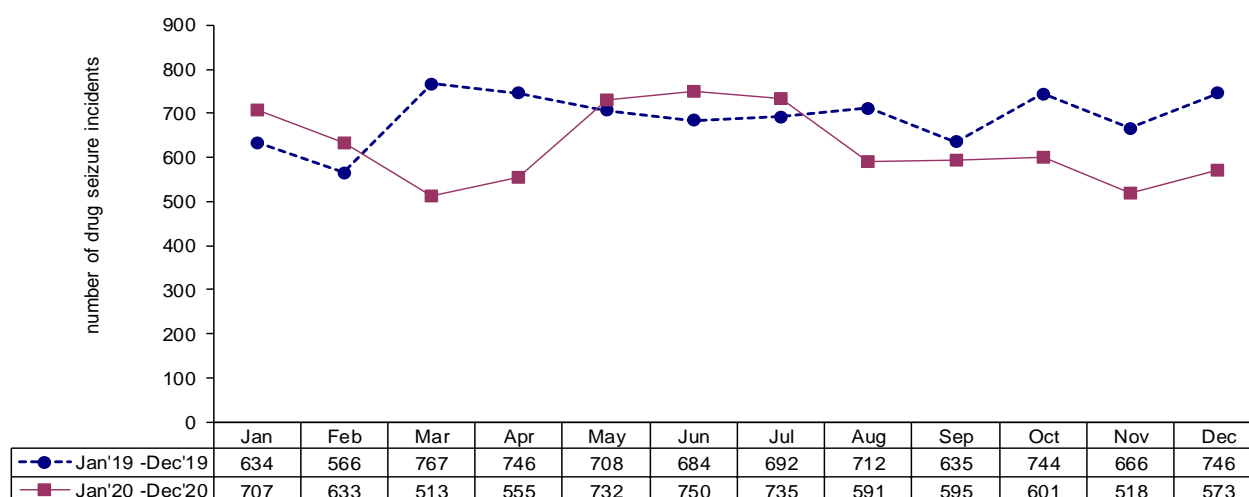


Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to December 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

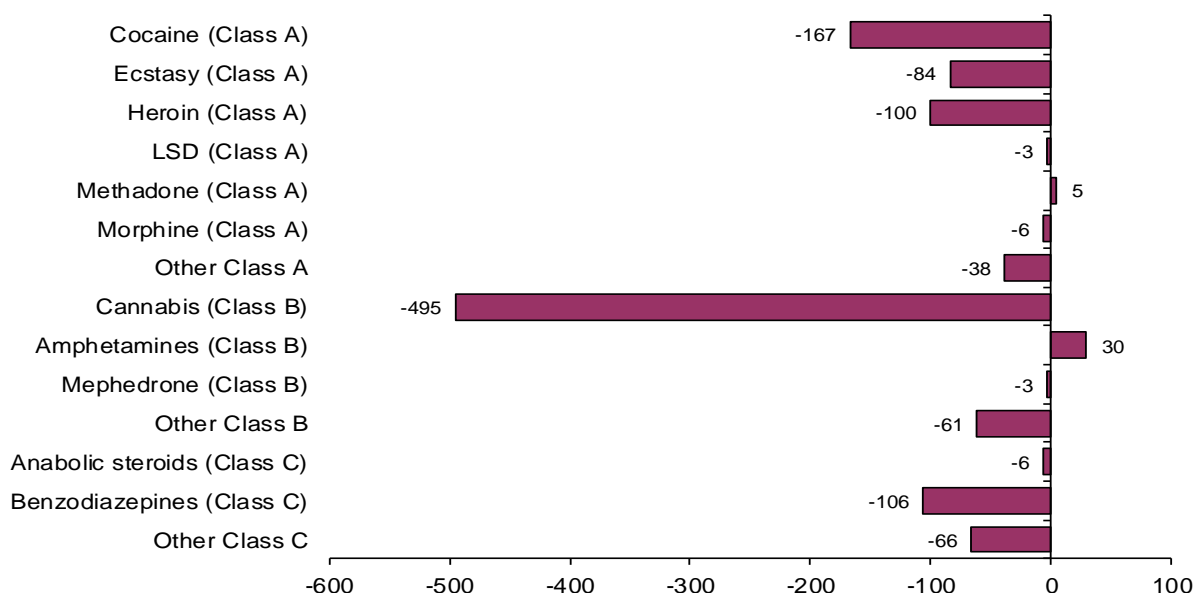


Table 1 Number of drug seizures¹ by class and drug type

Drug class ²	Drug type ²	Numbers		
		Drug seizure incidents		change
		Jan'19-Dec'19	Jan'20-Dec'20 ³	
Class A	Cocaine	1,105	938	-167
	Ecstasy	243	159	-84
	Heroin	256	156	-100
	LSD	18	15	-3
	Methadone	11	16	5
	Morphine	17	11	-6
	Other Class A ⁴	122	84	-38
	All Class A	1,688	1,308	-380
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	4,841	4,758	-83
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	637	134	-503
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	101	113	12
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	671	645	-26
	Total cannabis	5,788	5,293	-495
	Amphetamines	86	116	30
	Mephedrone	10	7	-3
	Other Class B ⁵	131	70	-61
	All Class B	5,934	5,413	-521
Class C	Anabolic steroids	38	32	-6
	Benzodiazepines	1,234	1,128	-106
	Other Class C ^{6,7}	788	722	-66
	All Class C	1,814	1,668	-146
All drugs	8,300	7,503	-797	

¹ As each seizure incident can involve more than one class or type of drug, seizure figures for individual drugs cannot be added together to produce totals as this will sum to more than the total number of seizures.

² Not all drug seizures are subject to forensic testing to officially confirm the drug type seized. When testing is not applied, the PSNI's drug seizure statistics are classified in accordance with the investigating officer's assessment of the drug type seized based on their experience and knowledge of the illegal drug trade in Northern Ireland.

³ Changes can be expected to in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2020 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2021.

⁴ Other Class A drugs include fentanyl/ fentanyl derivatives, oxycodone, psilocin (magic mushrooms) and methamphetamine (crystal meth).

⁵ Other Class B drugs include cathinone derivatives, codeine/ dihydrocodeine, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), ketamine, barbiturates and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.

⁶ Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/ GBL and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

⁷ Other Class C drugs also include Pregabalin and Gabapentin which were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

4. Drug seizures - what has been happening in policing districts?

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, eight policing districts showed a decrease in drug seizure incidents. [Table 2 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#)]

Figure 5 Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to December 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

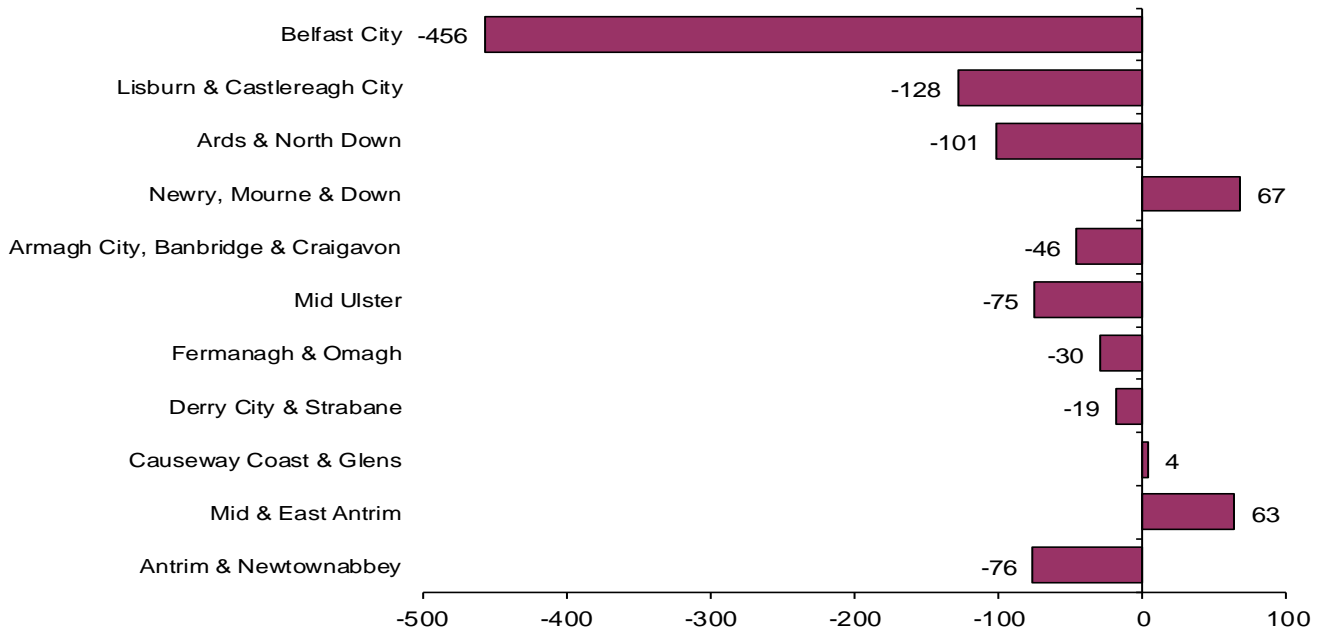


Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district ¹	Drug seizure incidents		
	Jan'19-Dec'19	Jan'20-Dec20 ²	change
Belfast City	2,755	2,299	-456
<i>East</i>	442	399	-43
<i>North</i>	748	670	-78
<i>South</i>	1,132	811	-321
<i>West</i>	433	419	-14
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	674	546	-128
Ards & North Down	413	312	-101
Newry, Mourne & Down	578	645	67
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	799	753	-46
Mid Ulster	504	429	-75
Fermanagh & Omagh	304	274	-30
Derry City & Strabane	668	649	-19
Causeway Coast & Glens	486	490	4
Mid & East Antrim	614	677	63
Antrim & Newtownabbey	505	429	-76
Northern Ireland	8,300	7,503	-797

¹ Seizure incidents are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for approximately one third of all drug seizure incidents recorded in Northern Ireland. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West).

² Changes can be expected to in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2020 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2021.

5. What is happening to drug-related arrests over the longer term?

A drug-related arrest is counted when a person is arrested and processed through custody for one or more drug-related offences. The figures presented are a count of custody records rather than a count of persons arrested. Where a person has been arrested on more than one occasion during a financial year, each occasion on which they have been arrested will be counted separately. The arrest figures do not include persons who are street-bailed but are not later processed through custody.

The number of arrests for drug offences has increased in most of the years since 2006/07. The level recorded in 2019/20 (3,829) is approaching twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

Figure 6 Trends in drug-related arrests since 2006/07

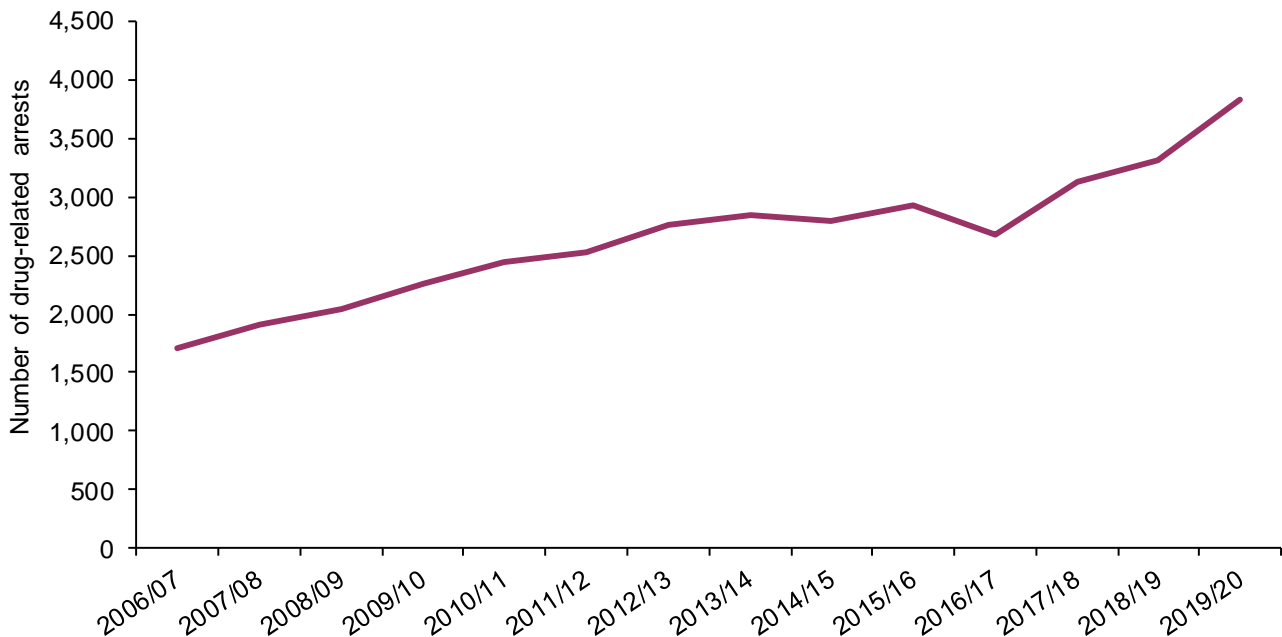
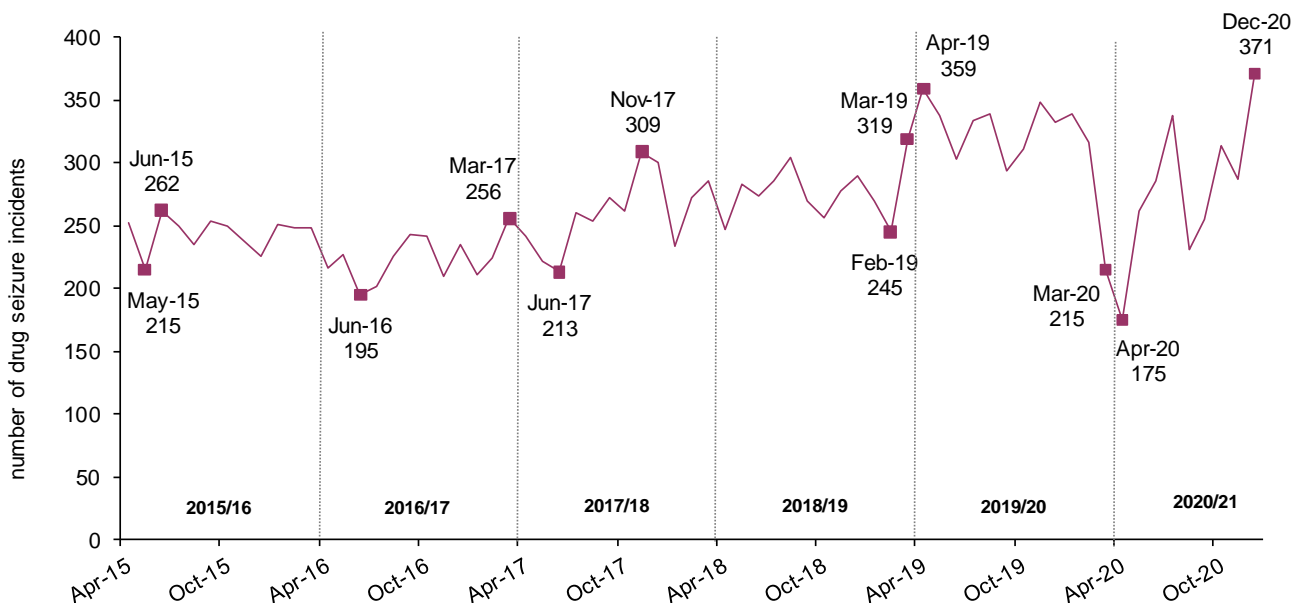


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2014. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests. For further information please refer to section 6 of this bulletin.

Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2015 to December 2020, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



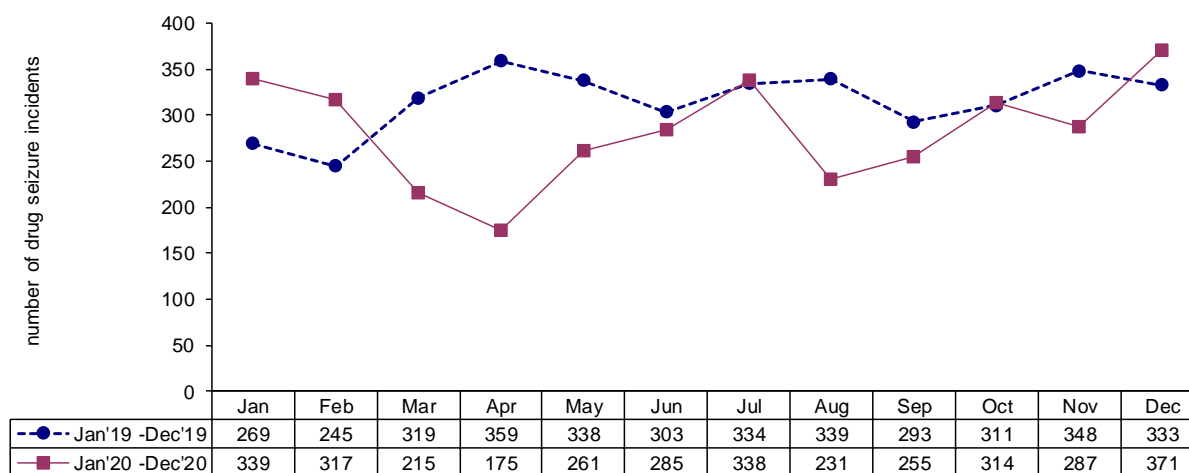
More detailed information on trends in drug arrests is available in the [Annual Trends report](#) on the PSNI website.

6. What has been happening to drug-related arrests more recently?

In the 12 months from 1st January 2020 to 31st December 2020:

- There were 3,388 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 403 (10.6 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. A fall in drug-related arrests was last seen between 2015/16 and 2016/17 [Table 3 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#) Figure 6].
- The fall in the number of drug-related arrests in March and April may be related to the Covid-19 lockdown measures that were introduced on 23rd March 2020. Between The overall trend in the number of drug-related arrests recorded since the lockdown measures were introduced is broadly similar to that seen for drug seizure incidents (Section 3 of this bulletin) and is similar to the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period (Figure 12, [Police recorded crime update to 31st December 2020](#)).
- There were 175 drug-related arrests in April 2020, the first time the monthly figure has been below 200 since June 2016.
- The largest falls during 2020 when compared with the same months in 2019 were seen in March, April and August which were lower by 104, 184 and 108 respectively.
- Drug-related arrests were higher in January, February, July, October and December 2020 when compared with the same months in 2019, by 70, 72, 4, 3 and 38 respectively.

Figure 8 Drug-related arrests January 2019 to December 2020



7. Drug-related arrests - what has been happening in policing districts?

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, nine policing districts showed a decrease in drug-related arrests. Belfast City showed the largest decrease and accounted for 38 per cent of all drug-related arrests during the latest 12 months. [Table 3 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#)]

Figure 9 Change in drug-related arrests by policing district, 12 months to December 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

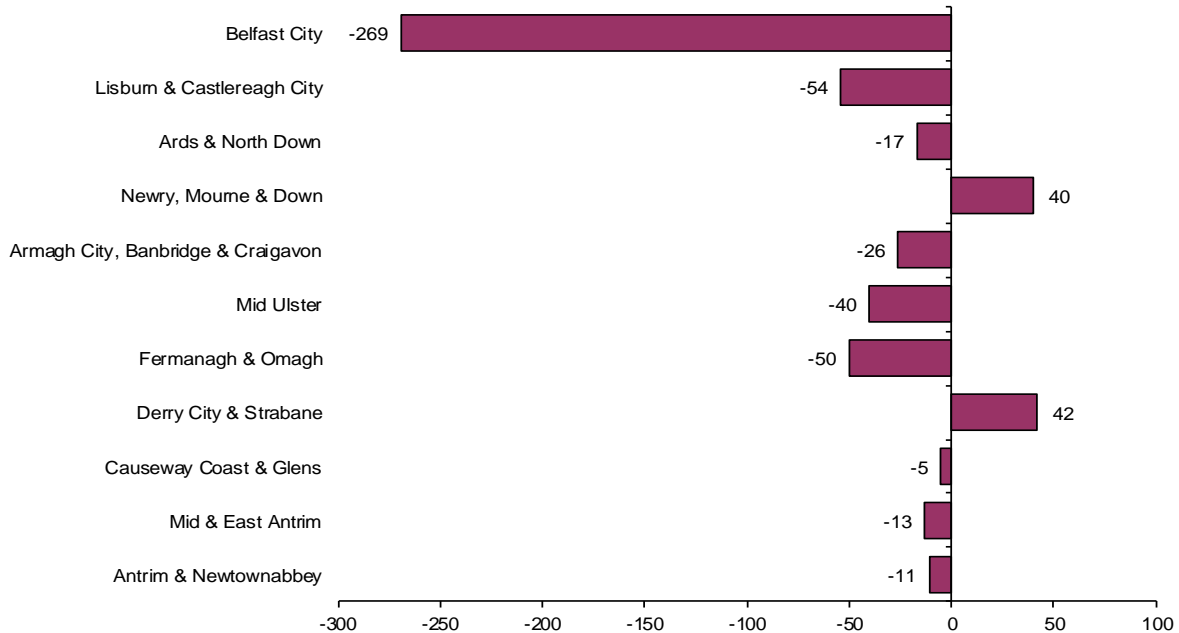


Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district

Policing district ¹	Numbers		
	Drug-related arrests		
	Jan'19-Dec'19	Jan'20-Dec'20 ²	change
Belfast City	1548	1279	-269
<i>East</i>	224	174	-50
<i>North</i>	421	354	-67
<i>South</i>	696	517	-179
<i>West</i>	207	234	27
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	294	240	-54
Ards & North Down	148	131	-17
Newry, Mourne & Down	173	213	40
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	277	251	-26
Mid Ulster	182	142	-40
Fermanagh & Omagh	148	98	-50
Derry City & Strabane	400	442	42
Causeway Coast & Glens	226	221	-5
Mid & East Antrim	200	187	-13
Antrim & Newtownabbey	195	184	-11
Northern Ireland	3,791	3,388	-403

¹ Drug-related arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for around 40 per cent of all drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West).

² Changes can be expected to in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2020 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2021.

8. Background and Data Quality

Data Collection

When a drug is seized by police there are procedures in place that cover the handling, management, storage and disposal of seized substances. One requirement of these procedures is that the details of the seized substances are added to PSNI's record management system. Statistics on drug seizures are based on information extracted from PSNI's record management system and separately collated on a bespoke database. In order for a seizure to be included in the published statistics a range of information is required including, but not limited to, drug type, drug format, estimated weight or quantity seized and any details relating to forensic examination.

Drug-related arrests are extracted from custody data, where a person has been arrested and processed through police custody for one or more drug-related offences (ie related to the Misuse of Drugs Act or the Psychoactive Substances Act). Persons arrested and street-bailed, dealt with by other means or whose detention was not authorised are not included in these statistics.

Data Quality

A quality assurance process is in place to ensure that the data is fit for purpose and published to the highest possible standard. A set of checks have been written to identify incidents that indicate drugs may have been seized. Where there are no drugs details are available, each record will be followed up to confirm seizure and ensure the required details are input. A range of data quality checks are regularly conducted on the seizure data to identify incomplete or inconsistent records, potential duplication of records and input errors. Large seizures are also checked.

Further details on Police Recorded Drug Seizure and Arrest statistics are available in the [User Guide](#).

Classification of Drug Types

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 divides drugs into three categories, Class A, B and C, according to the harmfulness they cause to the user or to society when they are misused. Class A drugs are considered to be the most harmful. Further information on drugs covered under the MDA is available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlled-drugs-list--2>

Class A	Class B	Class C
Cocaine	Amphetamines	Anabolic Steroids
Ecstasy	Cannabis	Benzodiazepines
Heroin	Mephedrone	Other Class C ^{3,4}
LSD	Other Class B ²	
Methadone		
Morphine		
Other Class A ¹		

¹ Other Class A drugs include fentanyl, oxycodone, psilocin (magic mushrooms) and methamphetamine (crystal meth).

² Other Class B drugs include cathinone derivatives, codeine/dihydrocodeine, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), ketamine and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.

³ Other Class C drugs include tramadol, bupreorphine, GHB/GBL and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

⁴ Other Class C drugs also include Pregabalin and Gabapentin which were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

Data Use

The drug seizures and drug-related arrests statistics are mainly used within PSNI as management information and to monitor performance on drug crime targets against the policing plan. The figures are also used by government departments and other voluntary and statutory agencies to inform debate and policy development regarding drug crime in NI.

Data Availability

A consistent data series at the overall level of drug seizure incident and drug-related arrest is available dating back to 2006/07, while a consistent data series at the level of individual drug type and format is available for the period dating back to 2012/13. These data series are published in an Annual Trends report which can be accessed through: <https://www.psnipolice.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/drug-seizure-statistics/>

Publication

A [publication schedule](#) is available on the PSNI website.

Tables and charts in this bulletin are available on the PSNI website in the form of an accompanying spreadsheet, which also provides additional levels of detail. It is available in [both excel](#) format and [open document](#) format.

Related information available on the PSNI website

Police Recorded Crime Statistics: These statistics are updated on a monthly basis and a trends report is published annually, with publication dates available in the [publication schedule](#).

Crime Outcomes: The latest publication presenting the wider outcomes framework within PSNI and summarising the outcomes that have been assigned to crimes recorded by the police between 2015/16 and 2018/19 was published on 29 November 2019.

These publications can be accessed through: <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/>