

# Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

## Update to 31 March 2021

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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 2020/21. Figures for the latest 12 months show an increase in drug seizure incidents but a fall in drug-related arrests.

In 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021:

- There were 8,349 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 163 (2.0 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- There were lower levels of seizure incidents for Class A drugs but there were increases for Classes B and C.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by benzodiazepines (Class C) and cocaine (Class A).
- Eight policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,314 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 515 (13.4 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 fall.



Northern Ireland  
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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 March 2021. Figures were compiled on 6 May 2021; as of that date 96.7% of seizure incidents for April 2020 to March 2021 have been fully validated; 3.3% are fully/partly outstanding or are still awaiting PSNI 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 January to March. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 30 June 2021 will be published in July 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. Arrests related to the Misuse of Drugs Act are presented in this bulletin.

### 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 30 percent of all drug seizure incidents and 36 per cent of drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland during the 12 months to March 2021. 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 2010/21 (8,349 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**

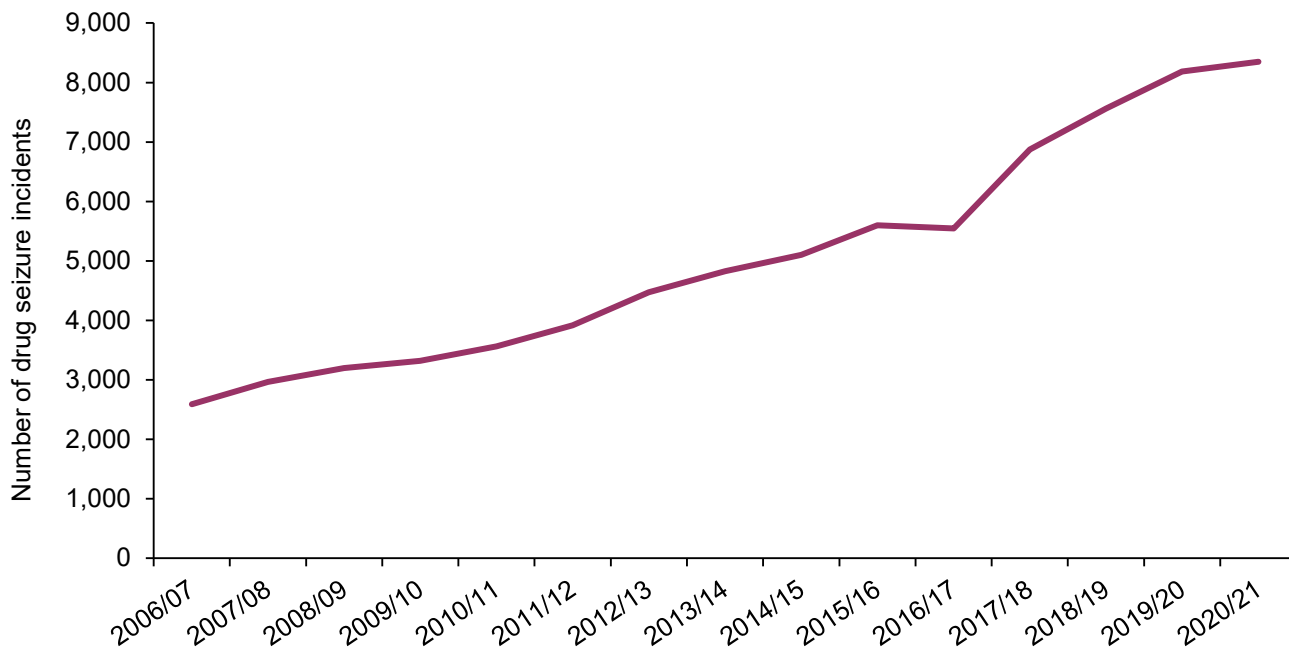
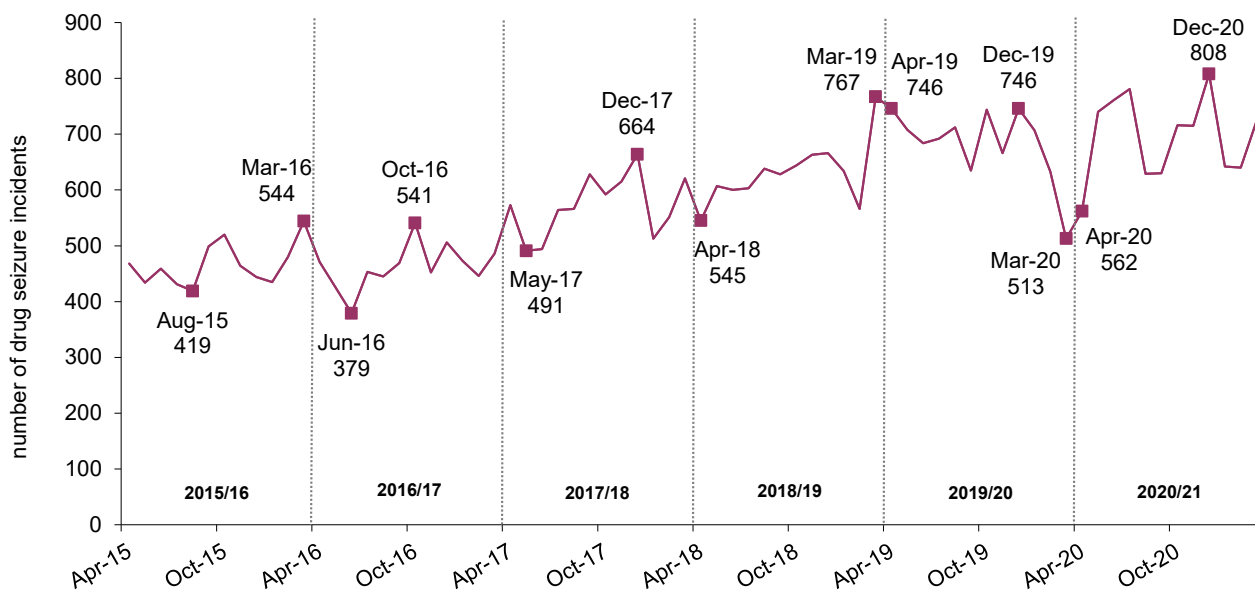


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2015. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures since this date. For further information please refer to section 3 of this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

**Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2015 to March 2021, 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.

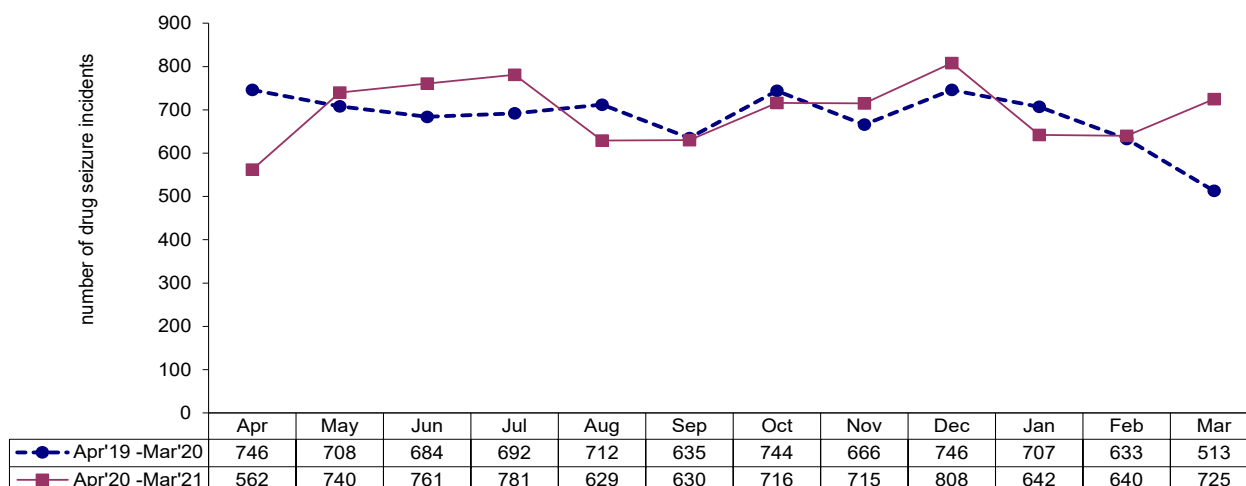
### 3. What has been happening to drug seizures more recently?

In the 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021:

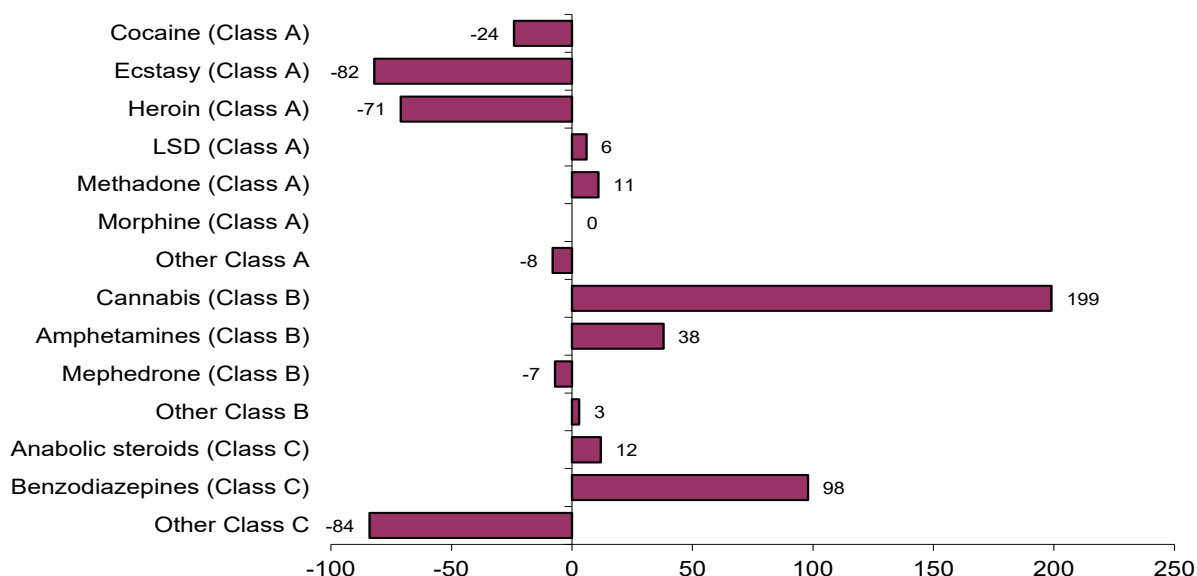
- There were 8,349 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 163 (2.0 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 8,186 were recorded.
- There were lower levels of seizure incidents for Class A drugs but there were increases for Classes B and C.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed 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 by 374 from 507 to 133 (73.8 per cent).
- Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizure incidents since recorded, particularly the lower levels seen in March 2020 and April 2020. 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 March 2021](#)). 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 January to March.

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 April 2019 to March 2021**



**Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to March 2021 compared with the previous 12 months**



**Table 1 Number of drug seizures<sup>1</sup> by class and drug type**

Drug class <sup>2</sup>	Drug type <sup>2</sup>	Numbers		
		Drug seizure incidents		change
		Apr'19-Mar'20	Apr'20-Mar'21 <sup>3</sup>	
<b>Class A</b>	Cocaine	1,114	1,090	-24
	Ecstasy	231	149	-82
	Heroin	241	170	-71
	LSD	16	22	6
	Methadone	11	22	11
	Morphine	16	16	0
	Other Class A <sup>4</sup>	110	102	-8
	<b>All Class A</b>	<b>1,655</b>	<b>1,497</b>	<b>-158</b>
<b>Class B</b>	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	4,816	5,275	459
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	507	133	-374
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	94	129	35
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	671	667	-4
	<b>Total cannabis</b>	<b>5,637</b>	<b>5,836</b>	<b>199</b>
	Amphetamines	89	127	38
	Mephedrone	14	7	-7
	Other Class B <sup>5</sup>	120	123	3
<b>All Class B</b>	<b>5,781</b>	<b>5,998</b>	<b>217</b>	
<b>Class C</b>	Anabolic steroids	33	45	12
	Benzodiazepines	1,197	1,295	98
	Other Class C <sup>6,7</sup>	922	838	-84
	<b>All Class C</b>	<b>1,869</b>	<b>1,918</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>All drugs</b>	<b>8,186</b>	<b>8,349</b>	<b>163</b>	

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

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

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

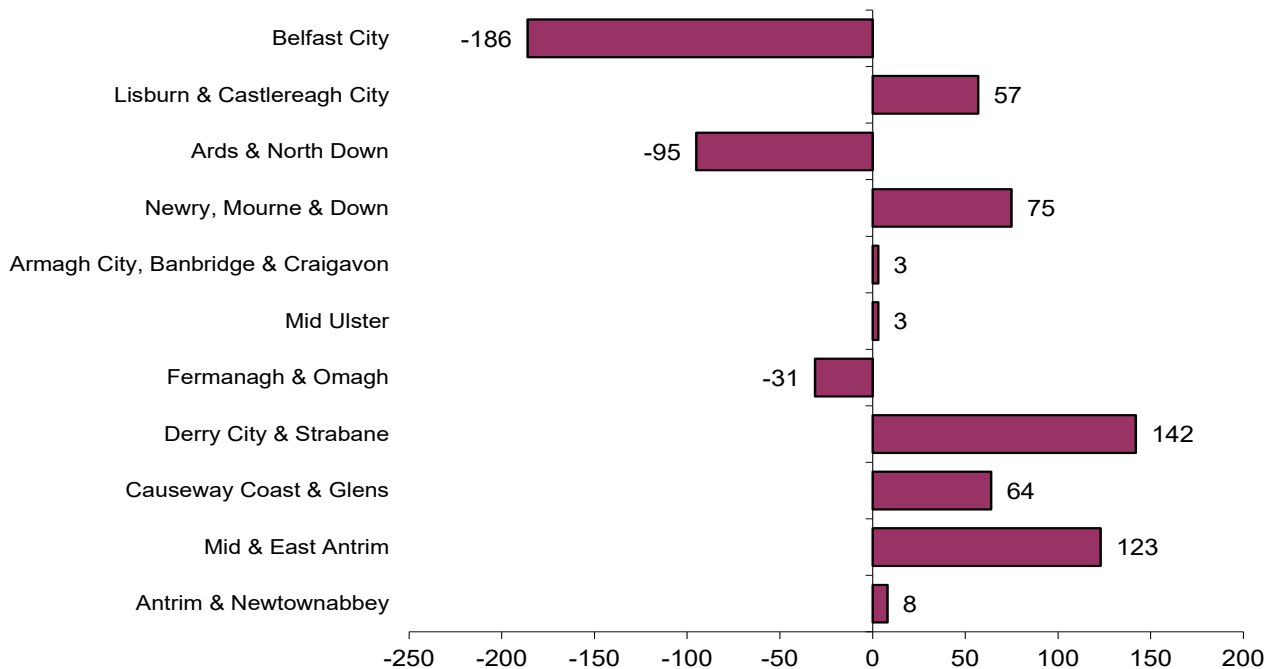
<sup>6</sup> Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/ GBL and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

<sup>7</sup> 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 an increase in drug seizure incidents. [Table 2 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#)]

**Figure 5 Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to March 2021 compared with the previous 12 months**



**Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district**

Policing district <sup>1</sup>	Drug seizure incidents			Numbers
	Apr'19-Mar'20	Apr'20-Mar21 <sup>2</sup>	change	
Belfast City	2,644	2,458	-186	
<i>East</i>	412	439	27	
<i>North</i>	692	731	39	
<i>South</i>	1,115	826	-289	
<i>West</i>	425	462	37	
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	603	660	57	
Ards & North Down	407	312	-95	
Newry, Mourne & Down	617	692	75	
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	799	802	3	
Mid Ulster	493	496	3	
Fermanagh & Omagh	322	291	-31	
Derry City & Strabane	670	812	142	
Causeway Coast & Glens	490	554	64	
Mid & East Antrim	663	786	123	
Antrim & Newtownabbey	478	486	8	
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>8,186</b>	<b>8,349</b>	<b>163</b>	

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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, with falls experienced in 2014/15 (1.3 per cent), 2016/17 (8.2 per cent) and 2020/21 (13.4 per cent). The level recorded in 2020/21 (3,314) is nearly twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

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

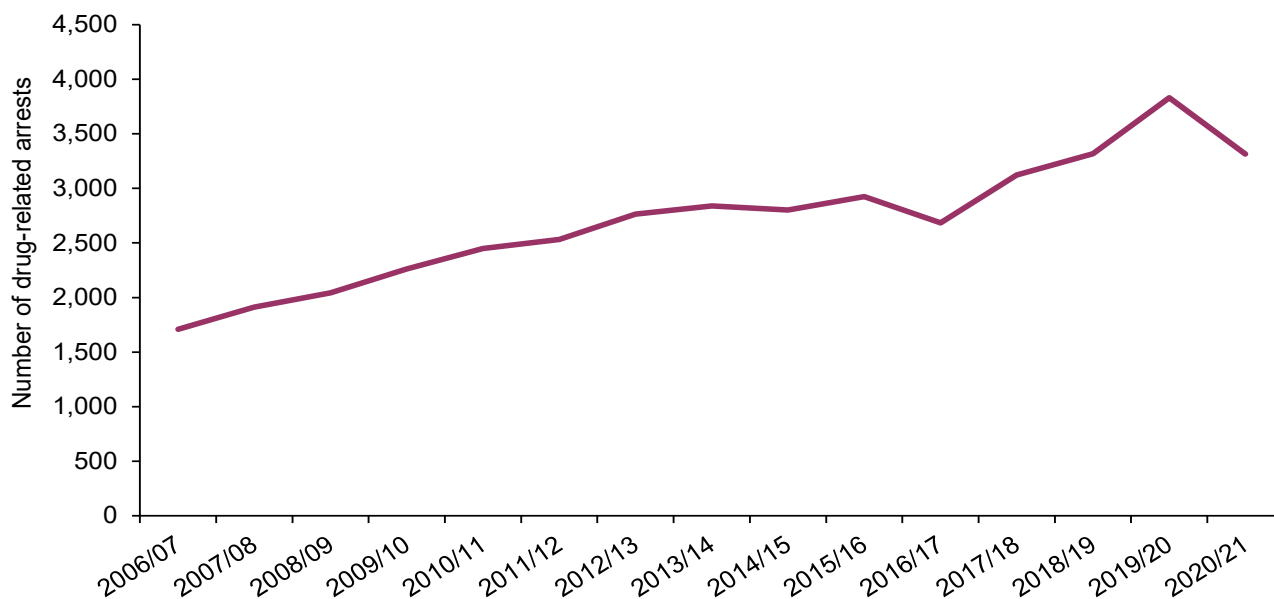
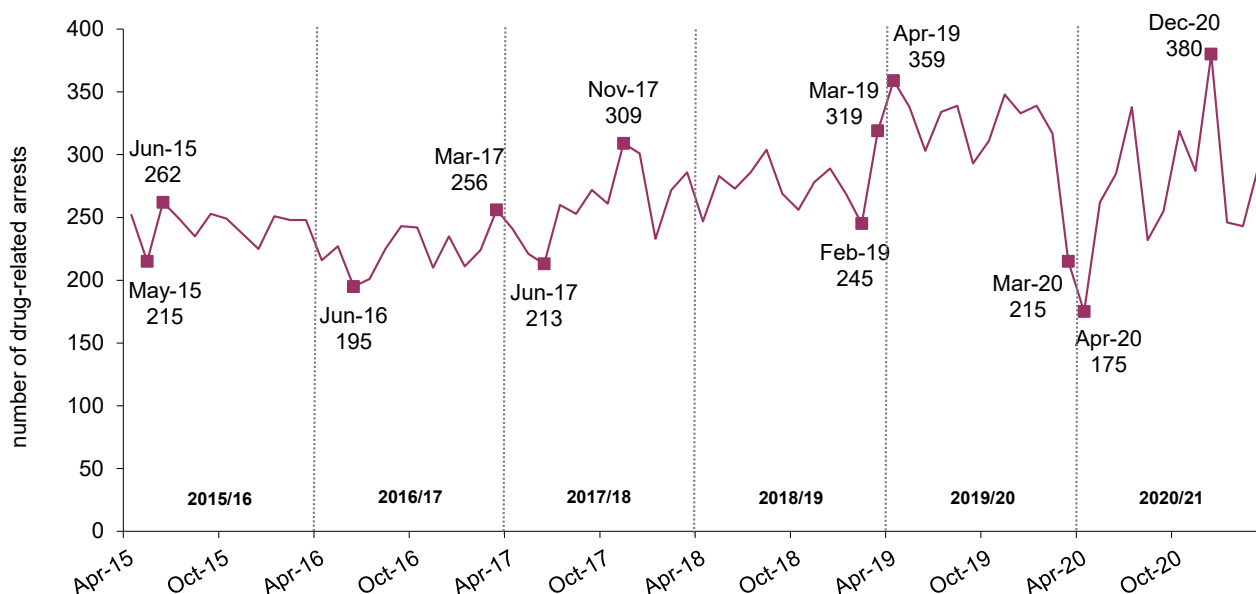


Figure 7 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2015. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests since this date. For further information please refer to section 6 of this bulletin.

**Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2015 to March 2021, 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.

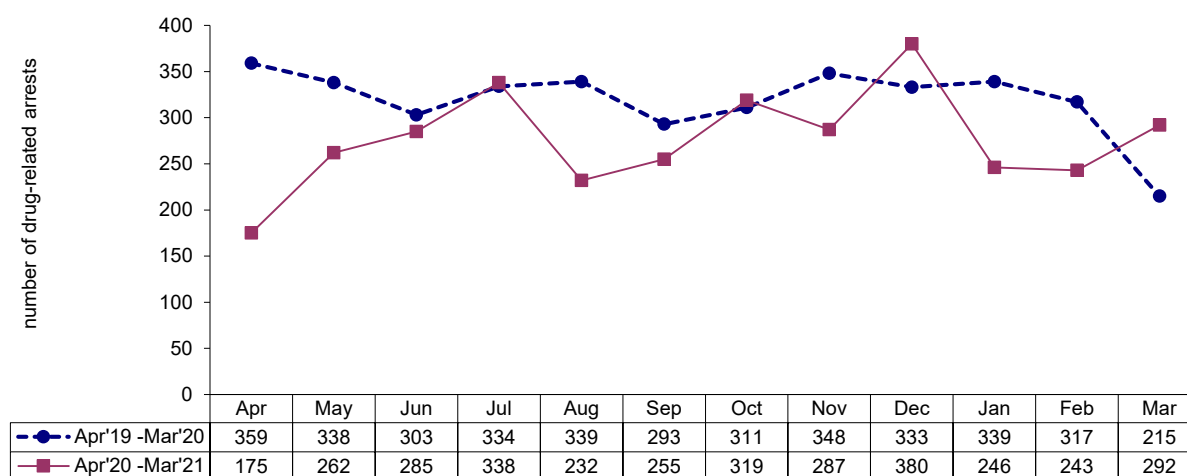


## 6. What has been happening to drug-related arrests more recently?

In the 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021:

- There were 3,314 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 515 (13.4 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. [Table 3 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#) Figure 6].
- The fall in the number of drug-related arrests in March 2020 and April 2020 may be related to the Covid-19 lockdown measures that were introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. A further drop in drug-related arrests for January and February may also been impacted by the lockdown measures which were put in place on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2020. The overall trend in the number of drug-related arrests recorded since the lockdown measures were first introduced is broadly similar to that seen for both drug seizure incidents (Section 3 of this bulletin) and the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period (Figure 12, [Police recorded crime update to 31st March 2021](#)).
- There were 175 drug-related arrests in April 2020, the first time the monthly figure has been below 200 since June 2016.
- There were 380 drug-related arrests in December 2020 which is the highest monthly figure recorded.
- The largest falls during 2020/21 when compared with the same months in 2019/20 were seen in April, August and January which were lower by 184, 107 and 93 respectively.
- Drug-related arrests were higher in July, October, December and March of 2020/21 when compared with the previous 12 month period, by 4, 8, 47 and 77 respectively.

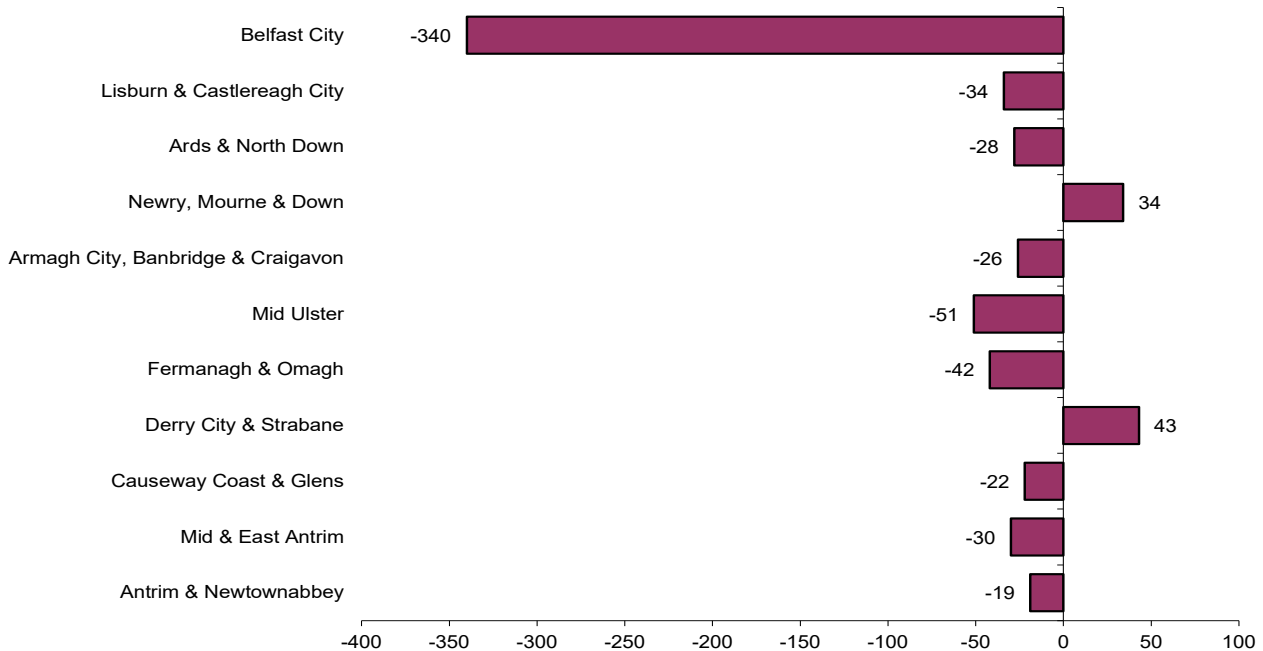
**Figure 8 Drug-related arrests April 2019 to March 2021**



## 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 36.3 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 March 2021 compared with the previous 12 months**



**Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district**

Policing district <sup>1</sup>	Numbers		
	Apr'19-Mar'20	Apr'20-Mar'21 <sup>2</sup>	change
Belfast City	1,541	1,201	-340
<i>East</i>	186	185	-1
<i>North</i>	403	350	-53
<i>South</i>	736	447	-289
<i>West</i>	216	219	3
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	278	244	-34
Ards & North Down	150	122	-28
Newry, Mourne & Down	176	210	34
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	280	254	-26
Mid Ulster	185	134	-51
Fermanagh & Omagh	150	108	-42
Derry City & Strabane	430	473	43
Causeway Coast & Glens	233	211	-22
Mid & East Antrim	213	183	-30
Antrim & Newtownabbey	193	174	-19
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>3,829</b>	<b>3,314</b>	<b>-515</b>

<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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, those arrests related to the Misuse of Drugs Act are presented in this bulletin. 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 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 <sup>3,4</sup>
LSD	Other Class B <sup>2</sup>	
Methadone		
Morphine		
Other Class A <sup>1</sup>		

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

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

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

<sup>4</sup> 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 2019/20 was published on 27 November 2020.

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