

Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

Update to 30 September 2020

Date of Publication:

29 October 2020


Frequency of Publication:

Quarterly, from 29 Oct 2020

Issued by:

PSNI Statistics Branch
Lisnasharragh
42 Montgomery Road
Belfast
BT6 9LD

 statistics@psni.police.uk

 028 9065 0222 Ext. 24135

Web [PSNI Statistics](#)

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 October 2019 to 30th September 2020:

- There were 7,690 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 427 (5.3 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).
- Seven policing districts showed a decrease in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,403 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 219 (6.0 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



	Page
1. Things you need to know about this release	2
Drug Seizures	
2. What is happening to drug seizures over the longer term?	3
3. What has been happening to drug seizures more recently?	4
4. Drug seizures - what has been happening in policing districts?	6
Drug-related Arrests	
5. What is happening to drug-related arrests over the longer term?	7
6. What has been happening to drug-related arrests more recently?	8
7. Drug-related arrests - what has been happening in policing districts?	9
8. Background and Data Quality	10

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 30 September 2020. Figures were compiled on 22 October 2020; as of that date 97% of seizure incidents for April to September 2020 have been fully validated; 3% are fully/partly outstanding or are still awaiting FSNI confirmation. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 31 December 2020 will be published on 29th January 2021. 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

Border Force 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 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 around 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

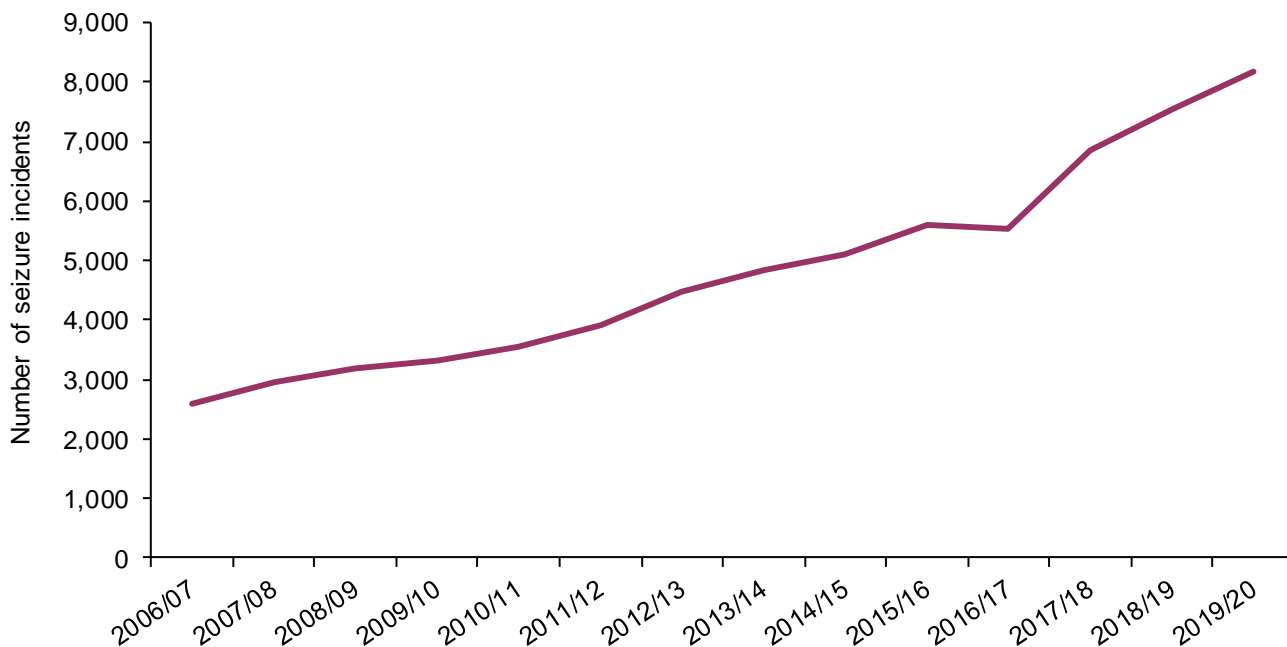
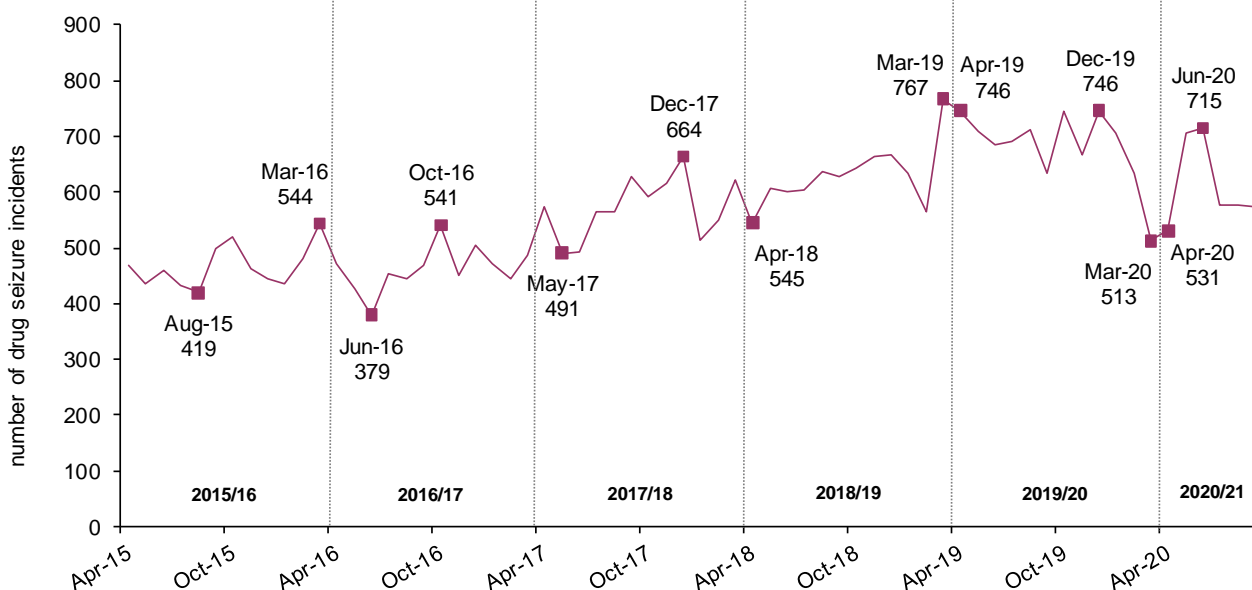


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2015. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures. For further information please refer to section 3 of this bulletin.

Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2015 to September 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 October 2019 to 30th September 2020:

- There were 7,690 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 427 (5.3 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 735 to 198 (73.1 per cent), while higher numbers of seizures were recorded for all other cannabis formats.
- 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. 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 30th September 2020](#)).

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 October 2018 to September 2020

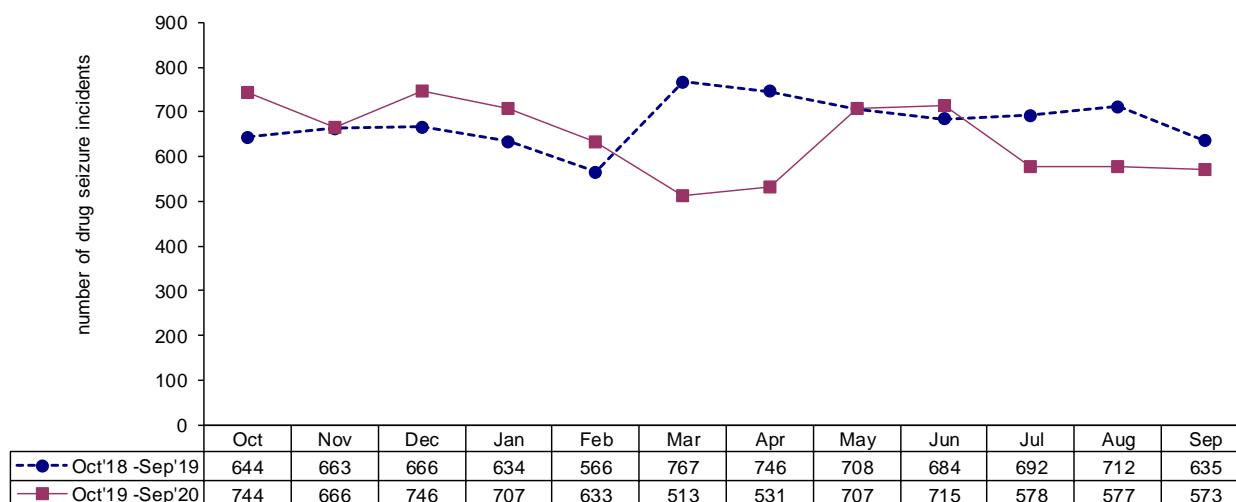


Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to September 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

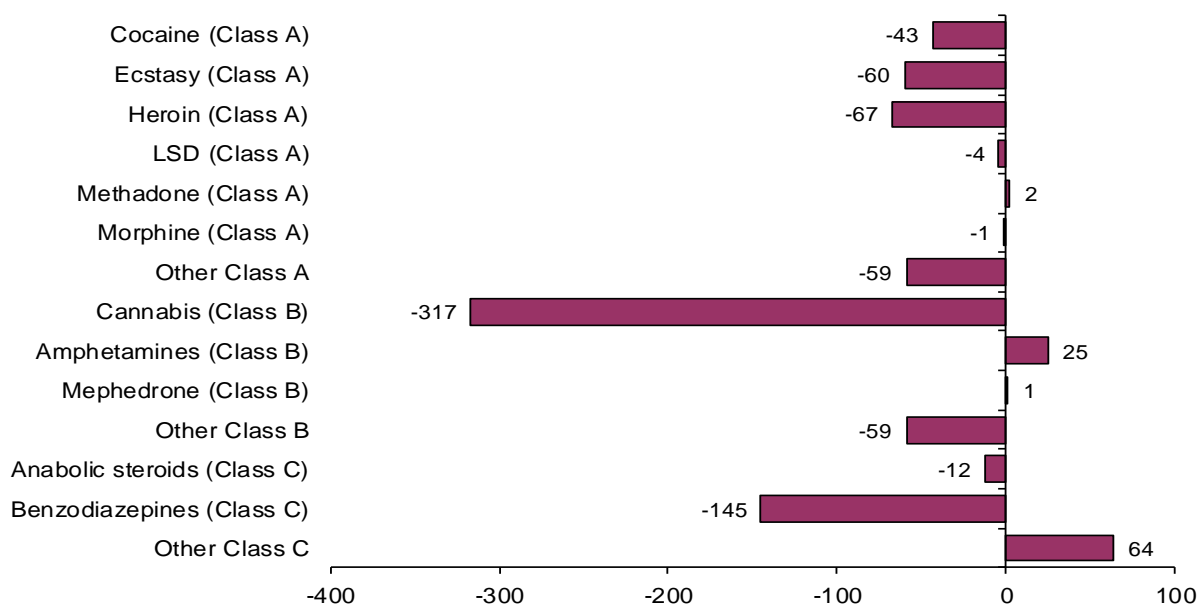


Table 1 Number of drug seizures¹ by class and drug type

Drug class ²	Drug type ²	Numbers		
		Drug seizure incidents		change
		Oct'18-Sep'19	Oct'19-Sep20 ³	
Class A	Cocaine	1,082	1,039	-43
	Ecstasy	250	190	-60
	Heroin	254	187	-67
	LSD	20	16	-4
	Methadone	10	12	2
	Morphine	13	12	-1
	Other Class A ⁴	139	80	-59
	All Class A	1,679	1,468	-211
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	4,714	4,779	65
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	735	198	-537
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	98	110	12
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	624	681	57
	Total cannabis	5,711	5,394	-317
	Amphetamines	78	103	25
	Mephedrone	8	9	1
	Other Class B ⁵	127	68	-59
All Class B	5,848	5,518	-330	
Class C	Anabolic steroids	44	32	-12
	Benzodiazepines	1,222	1,077	-145
	Other Class C ^{6,7}	637	701	64
	All Class C	1,696	1,617	-79
All drugs	8,117	7,690	-427	

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, seven 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 September 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

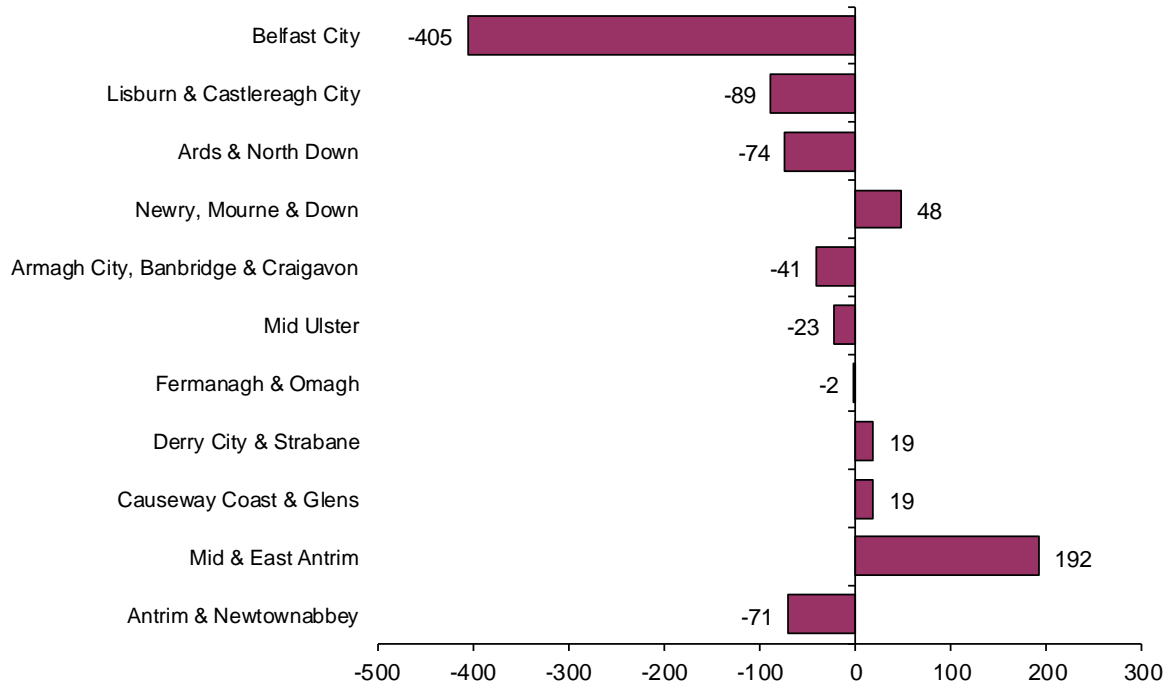


Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district ¹	Numbers		
	Drug seizure incidents		change
	Oct'18-Sep'19	Oct'19-Sep20 ²	
Belfast City	2,733	2,328	-405
<i>East</i>	440	413	-27
<i>North</i>	746	633	-113
<i>South</i>	1,105	879	-226
<i>West</i>	442	403	-39
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	667	578	-89
Ards & North Down	411	337	-74
Newry, Mourne & Down	592	640	48
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	811	770	-41
Mid Ulster	471	448	-23
Fermanagh & Omagh	311	309	-2
Derry City & Strabane	620	639	19
Causeway Coast & Glens	476	495	19
Mid & East Antrim	528	720	192
Antrim & Newtownabbey	497	426	-71
Northern Ireland	8,117	7,690	-427

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

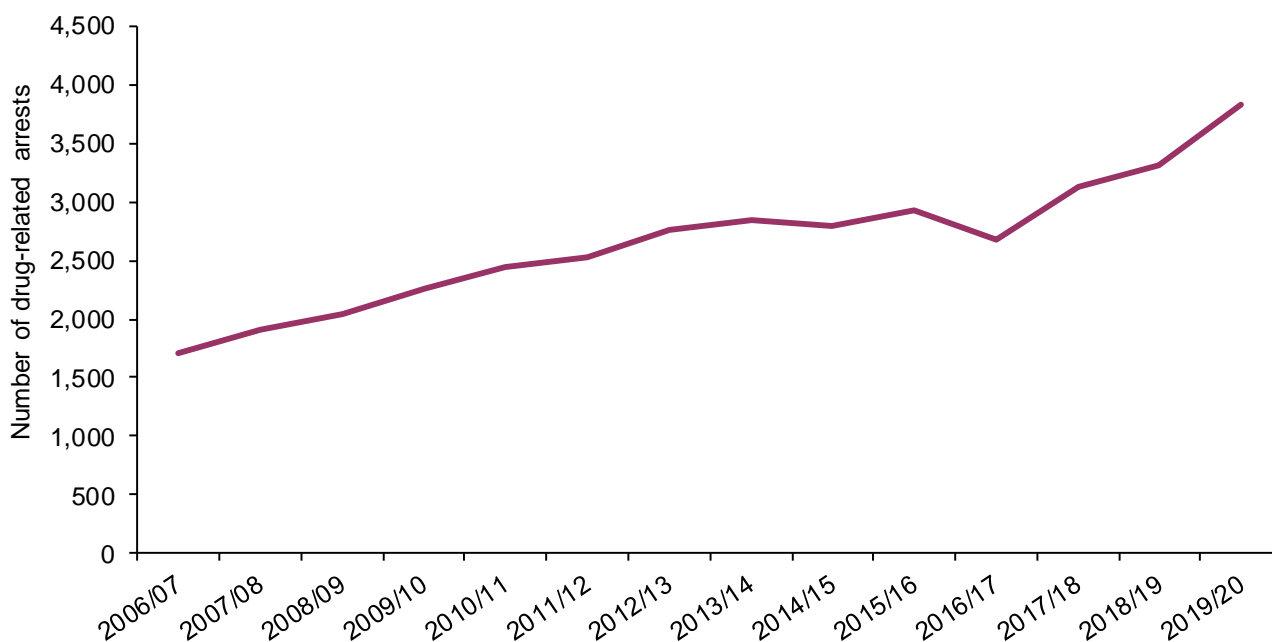
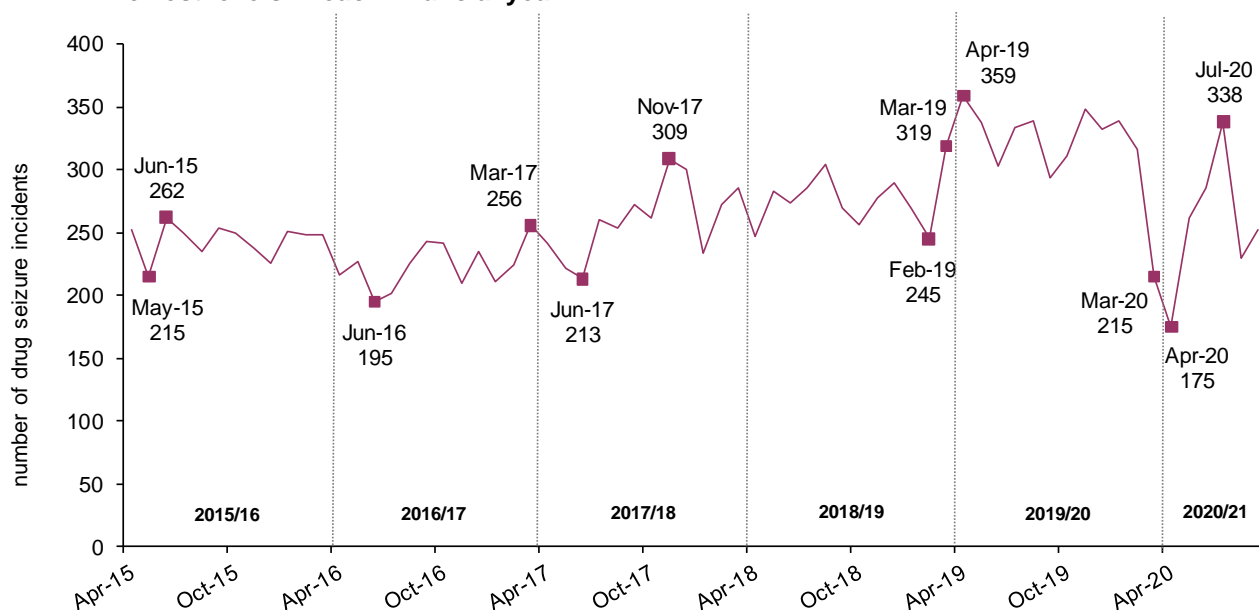


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2014. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests. For further information please refer to section 6 of this bulletin.

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



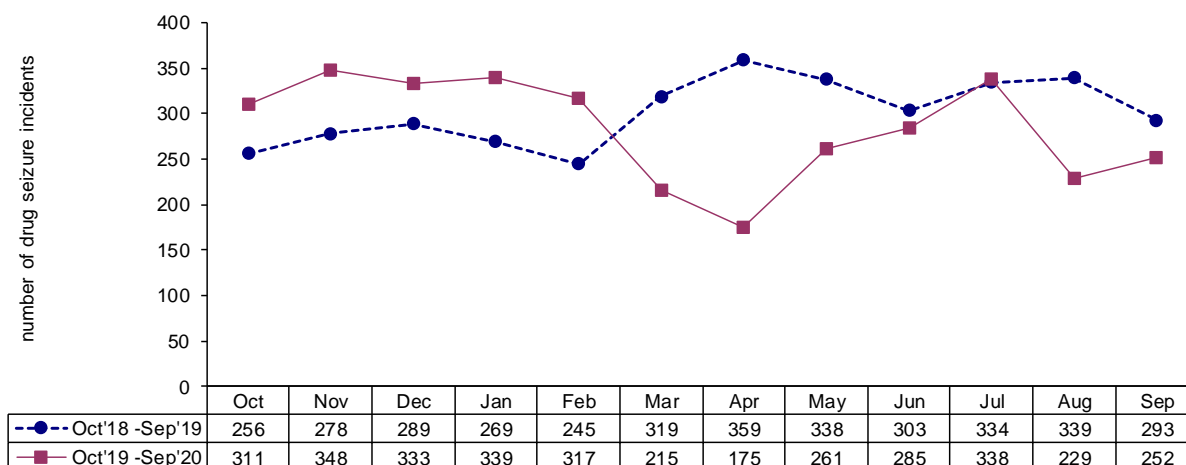
More detailed information on trends in drug arrests is available in the [Annual Trends report](#) on the PSNI website.

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

In the 12 months from 1st October 2019 to 30th September 2020:

- There were 3,403 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 219 (6.0 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. This is the first drop in drug-related arrests since 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. The trend in the number of drug-related arrests recorded since the lockdown measures were introduced is similar to that seen for the number of drug seizure incidents (Section 3 of this bulletin) and also to the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period (Figure 12, [Police recorded crime update to 30th September 2020](#)).
- There were 175 drug-related arrests in April 2020, the first time the monthly figure has been below 200 since June 2016.

Figure 8 Drug-related arrests October 2018 to September 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 39 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 September 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

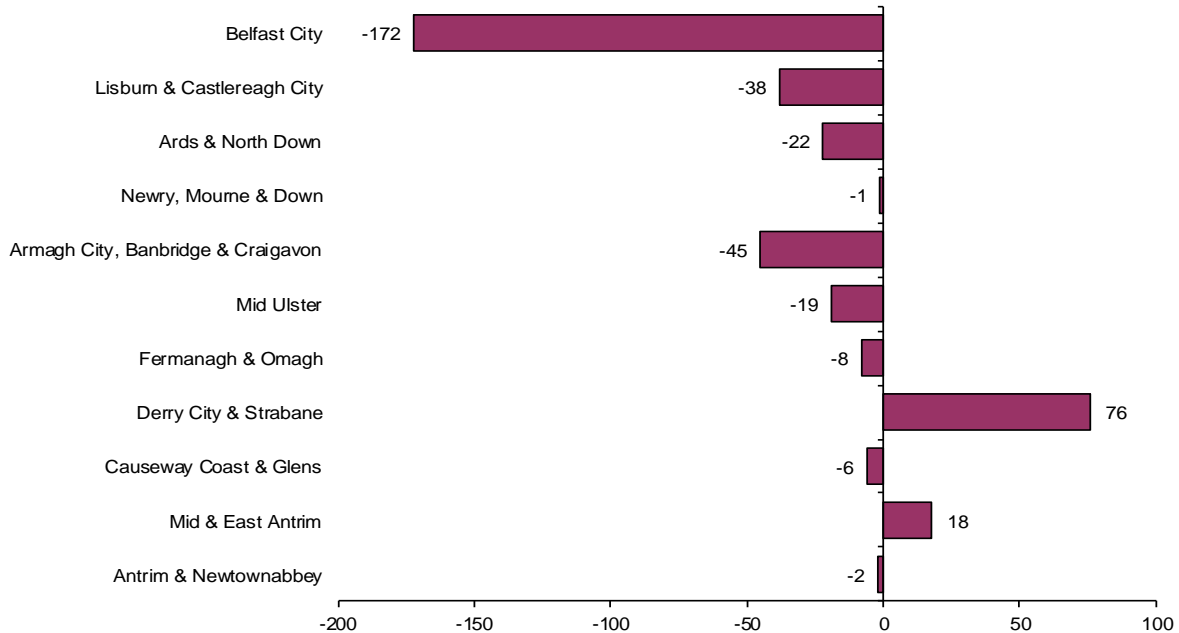


Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district

Policing district ¹	Numbers		
	Drug-related arrests		change
	Oct'18-Sep'19	Oct'19-Sep'20 ²	
Belfast City	1,484	1,312	-172
<i>East</i> ¹	211	182	-29
<i>North</i> ¹	399	341	-58
<i>South</i> ¹	650	574	-76
<i>West</i> ¹	224	215	-9
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	273	235	-38
Ards & North Down	153	131	-22
Newry, Mourne & Down	185	184	-1
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	287	242	-45
Mid Ulster	163	144	-19
Fermanagh & Omagh	136	128	-8
Derry City & Strabane	359	435	76
Causeway Coast & Glens	217	211	-6
Mid & East Antrim	181	199	18
Antrim & Newtownabbey	184	182	-2
Northern Ireland	3,622	3,403	-219

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	
Methodone		
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.psnipolice.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/>