



**Police Service**  
of Northern Ireland



# User Guide to Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in 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. Introduction

This user guide is designed to be a useful reference guide with explanatory notes on the issues and definitions that are key to the production and presentation of [police recorded drug seizures and arrests official statistics \(opens in a new window\)](#) in Northern Ireland.

The drug seizures and arrests statistical publications and accompanying datasets are collated and produced by statisticians seconded to the PSNI Statistics Branch from the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA). They are produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the [Code of Practice for Statistics \(opens in a new window\)](#).

## Coverage

The published statistics relate to police seizures of drugs controlled under the [Misuse of Drugs Act \(1971\) legislation \(MDA\) \(opens in a new window\)](#) and the [Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 legislation \(PSA\) \(opens in a new window\)](#), presenting both the number of seizures and the quantity of drugs seized.

Drugs seized by the Border Force are published quarterly by the Home Office as [Border Force transparency data \(opens in a new window\)](#), with Border Force seizures in each of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland presented separately. Border Force seizures within Northern Ireland are not included in the PSNI seizure statistics.

The number of drug-related arrests is published alongside the drug seizure statistics.

These drug seizure statistics should not themselves be considered a measure of drug prevalence, but should be considered along with other measures of drug prevalence in Northern Ireland for users to get a more comprehensive overview of the drug situation in Northern Ireland. Links to other sources of information on drugs within Northern Ireland are provided in Section 2.4, with availability of international comparisons provided in Section 2.5.

## Publication and availability

Publication dates for the drug seizure and arrest bulletins are pre-announced on the [Gov.uk Statistics: release calendar \(opens in a new window\)](#). They are also made available via the [publication schedule \(opens in a new window\)](#) on the PSNI website.

The latest bulletins and accompanying spreadsheets are published on the PSNI website [drug seizure statistics \(opens in a new window\)](#) page.

Provisional figures are published quarterly in January, April/May, July and October.

Annual trends in drug seizures and arrests are published in September/October, with this publication examining overall trends in seizures and arrests dating back to 2006/07, along with a breakdown of the types and quantities of drugs seized dating back to 2012/13. The first annual trends bulletin was published in September 2019.

## 2. Users and user engagement

The Code of Practice for Statistics is based on the three pillars of Trustworthiness, Quality and Value. As part of the Value pillar (producing statistics that support society's needs for information), PSNI publish information about users' experiences of statistical services, data quality and the format and timing of reports. Any interaction with key users of PSNI statistics usually falls into one of the three groups highlighted below:

- Engagement with users through meetings or correspondence.
- User Surveys – the key users of PSNI statistics are surveyed to ascertain what they think about the service they receive.
- Consultation exercises regarding proposed changes to statistical outputs or processes.

Users of these statistics can ask to be notified of publications as they are released. Users are also encouraged to contact us with any comments or suggestions for improvements. Information on the user engagement strategy and accessibility of publications can be found in the [PSNI Official Statistics documentation, PDF 491KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

### 2.1 Key users of PSNI drug seizures and arrests statistics

The key users of the PSNI's drug seizures and arrests statistics fall into three main groups:

- Officers and staff within PSNI
- Oversight bodies & wider government
- Academia, specific interest groups and the general public

### 2.2 Uses made of PSNI drug seizures and arrests statistics

Based on awareness of existing uses of the statistics and through responses received from User Surveys, the following examples provide an insight to the main uses made of PSNI drug seizure and arrest statistics.

#### Performance monitoring/ effectiveness of policing

- Monitoring through reports provided within PSNI and also through reports, as required, to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. At a more local level, policing districts work in collaboration with Police and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) who also make use of the drug seizure and arrest statistics to identify changing or emerging trends in their local area.

#### Policy making/ policy monitoring

- Various local and national special interest groups or voluntary organisations have a particular interest in the drug seizures and arrests statistics that relate to their policy area, which they use to lobby government department for policy or legislative change.
- [The Department of Health Substance Use Strategy 2021-31 \(opens in a new window\)](#)
- [UK Focal Point on Drugs \(opens in a new window\)](#)

#### Media related, Commercial interest and Personal interest

- Local and national media use the PSNI's drug seizure and arrest statistics to inform the public.
- Freedom of Information requests for information relating to drugs; the information requested can be very wide-ranging and the level of detail requested may not always be held.

#### To facilitate academic research

- Requests are also received from students asking for data to assist them in completing projects and presentations.

#### To inform public marketing campaigns

- Drug seizure and arrests may be used to make the public aware of levels of drug usage/ drug dealing, amongst other topics. In support of local community policing needs

## To aid decisions on resource allocation

- Some agencies and special interest groups are dependent on funding that is sometimes linked to drug crime levels in their area. Hence these groups are keen to be provided with details of specific drug seizures and arrests. Often these areas are at low levels of geography or perhaps for very local areas which are non-standard geographies.

## 2.3 User consultation

Details on how the level of service to suppliers and users is maintained on an ongoing basis are available in [PSNI Official Statistics documentation, PDF 491KB \(opens in a new window\)](#) Section 6 Customer service and user engagement. In January 2019 a [consultation on the drug seizure publication PDF \(76KB\) \(opens in a new window\)](#) was undertaken to seek users' views on changing the publication frequency of the drugs statistics bulletin and providing a more comprehensive and informative output. None of the responses received gave any objection to reducing frequency of publication from monthly to twice a year and additionally publishing a more detailed annual trends bulletin. It should be noted that from January 2021 the provision of in-year publications increased from twice a year to quarterly.

## 2.4 Other sources of information on drugs within Northern Ireland

Other sources that may assist in providing a wider picture of drug prevalence within NI include:

- [Organised Crime Task Force Annual Report and Threat Assessment](#)
- [Health survey Northern Ireland \(opens in a new window\)](#)
- [Department of Health drug-related statistics \(opens in a new window\)](#), including impact measurement tool for drug and alcohol services, census of drug and alcohol treatment services in Northern Ireland, drug prevalence survey, statistics from the Northern Ireland substance misuse database, young persons behaviour and attitudes survey
- [Drug-related deaths \(opens in a new window\)](#)
- [Prescription cost analysis \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Statistics relating to prosecutions, convictions, re-offending and the prison population, along with results from the Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey, may contain information relevant to drugs. These statistics are available through the [Statistics and Research section of the Department of Justice website \(opens in a new window\)](#)

## 2.5 National and International comparisons

Drug seizure statistics in England & Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland each relate to drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Even where data collections follow the same basis counting rules, any differences in the data collection methodologies, data coverage and drug categories reported on should always be borne in mind when comparing datasets.

**England and Wales:** The Home Office publish an annual Statistical Bulletin, [Seizures of Drugs in England and Wales \(opens in a new window\)](#).

**Scotland:** The Justice Directorate of the Scottish Government produces an annual statistical bulletin, [Drug Seizures and Offender Characteristics \(opens in a new window\)](#), covering drug seizures made by police forces in Scotland and the characteristics of those found in possession of drugs.

**Ireland:** drug seizure data comes from three main sources; [Revenue Customs Annual Reports \(opens in a new window\)](#), [An Garda Síochána Annual Reports \(opens in a new window\)](#) and the [Health Research Board National Drugs Library \(opens in a new window\)](#).

**International:** Until 2020 data submitted by the UK was published in an annual report produced by the [European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction \(opens in a new window\)](#) (EMCDDA). The 2020 report indicates "The United Kingdom left the European Union as of 1 February 2020 and is not included in the analysis presented in this report. UK data for 2019 can be found in the country data tables annex" The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime \(opens in a new window\)](#) (UNODC), world drug report.

## 3. Definitions and methodology

### 3.1 Definitions

#### Drug seizure incident

A **drug seizure incident** is one in which a drug controlled under the [Misuse of Drugs Act \(1971\) legislation \(MDA\) \(opens in a new window\)](#) is seized, recovered or found by police. This includes drugs intercepted in the post, drugs which are handed into the police and drugs recovered from RAPID (Remove All Prescription and Illegal Drugs) bins.

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 with Class A drugs considered to be the most harmful. Further information on drugs covered under the MDA is available in this [controlled drugs list \(opens in a new window\)](#). A table showing the classification of drugs under the MDA is available in 3.2.

**New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)** is the term used to describe all substances in scope of the [Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 legislation \(PSA\) \(opens in a new window\)](#). This Act came into effect in May 2016 and created a blanket ban on the production, distribution, sale and supply of psychoactive substances in the UK for human consumption.

A psychoactive substance is defined as any substance intended for human consumption that is capable of producing a psychoactive effect. In general, NPS are drugs designed to replicate the effects of other illegal substances. Before the PSA was introduced they were commonly referred to as 'legal highs'.

Seizures of New Psychoactive Substances are reported separately from seizures of drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

#### Cultivation of cannabis

Guidance from the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) defined commercial cultivation of cannabis as:

- Twenty-five or more cannabis plants, at any stage of growth (germination), are being or have been grown; or
- There is evidence of a cannabis farm.

They defined a cannabis farm as:

- The premises, or part therein, has been adapted to such an extent that normal usage would be inhibited and usually present within the premises, or part therein, are items solely concerned for the production of cannabis, i.e.: hydroponics system, high intensity lighting, ventilation/extraction fans, any other associated equipment, and/or electricity meter bypassed (abstraction of electricity).

In addition to the above, the overall appearance of the venue, together with available intelligence also indicates if the site was, is, or is intended to be a cannabis farm, irrespective of the number of plants present on the site. For example there may be no plants but the site has been made ready to commence cultivation.

The cannabis cultivation figures published in the Annual Trends bulletin are based on this definition.

#### Drug-related arrest

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

Arrest figures do not include persons who are street-bailed and are not later processed through custody.

As with drug seizures, arrests relating to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and arrests under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 are reported separately.

### 3.2 Classification of drug types

It is not feasible to publish seizure statistics in detail for every drug covered by the MDA. While all drugs are included in totals, only those in the table below are covered in detail in the statistical bulletins.

Class A	Class B	Class C
Cocaine	Amphetamines	Anabolic Steroids
Ecstasy	Cannabis <sup>1</sup>	Benzodiazepines <sup>2</sup>
Heroin	Mephedrone	Pregabalin <sup>3</sup>
LSD	Other Class B <sup>5</sup>	Gabapentin <sup>3</sup>
Methadone		Other Class C <sup>6</sup>
Morphine		
Other Class A <sup>4</sup>		

<sup>1</sup> Cannabis was reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug in January 2004, and then classified back to a Class B drug on 26 January 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Flualprazolam, flunitrazolam and norfludiazepam were classified as Class C controlled substances in August 2021 and are recorded as Benzodiazepines.

<sup>3</sup> Pregabalin and gabapentin were classified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

<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).

### 3.3 Drugs counting rules

A single seizure is where only one drug is seized on a particular occasion (e.g. cocaine).

A multiple seizure is where two or more drug types (e.g. heroin and cocaine) are seized on a particular occasion. The occasion is counted once in the total number of seizures, but a seizure is counted against each individual drug type and drug class involved.

Example: A seizure is made of cocaine, cannabis resin and herbal cannabis. This seizure would be counted as:

- Total seizures: One seizure in the overall total for the number of seizures.
- Drug type: One seizure of cocaine; one seizure of cannabis resin; one seizure of herbal cannabis; one overall seizure of cannabis.
- Drug class: One seizure of class A and one seizure of class C.

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.

### 3.4 Conversion factors

Most drugs can be seized in a variety of formats e.g. powder, ampoules and tablets/ capsules. In order to present all seized quantities within a given drug type in terms of one comparable unit (either kilograms or doses and plants for cannabis plants), conversion factors were developed by the Home Office. They are applied to the main drug types to provide comparable estimates of the overall quantity seized for that particular drug.

The conversion factors were last updated in 2005 and the Home Office note that it is possible that some quantity data (especially for those drugs where quantity is reported in terms of doses) is not entirely accurate. However as the same conversion factors are used throughout the entire time series, the trends data can be considered reliable ([Seizures of drugs in England and Wales: user guide \(opens in a new window\)](#), see section 1.2 Quality and methodology limitations on seizing drugs in different preparation types, and section 3.8 Conversion factors).

Unconverted drug seizure quantities providing the full range of formats/preparations recorded within Northern Ireland are also published.

### 3.5 Data use

The drug seizure and drug-related arrest statistics are mainly used within PSNI as management information and as performance information. The figures are also used by government departments and other voluntary and statutory agencies to inform debate and policy development regarding drug crime in Northern Ireland.

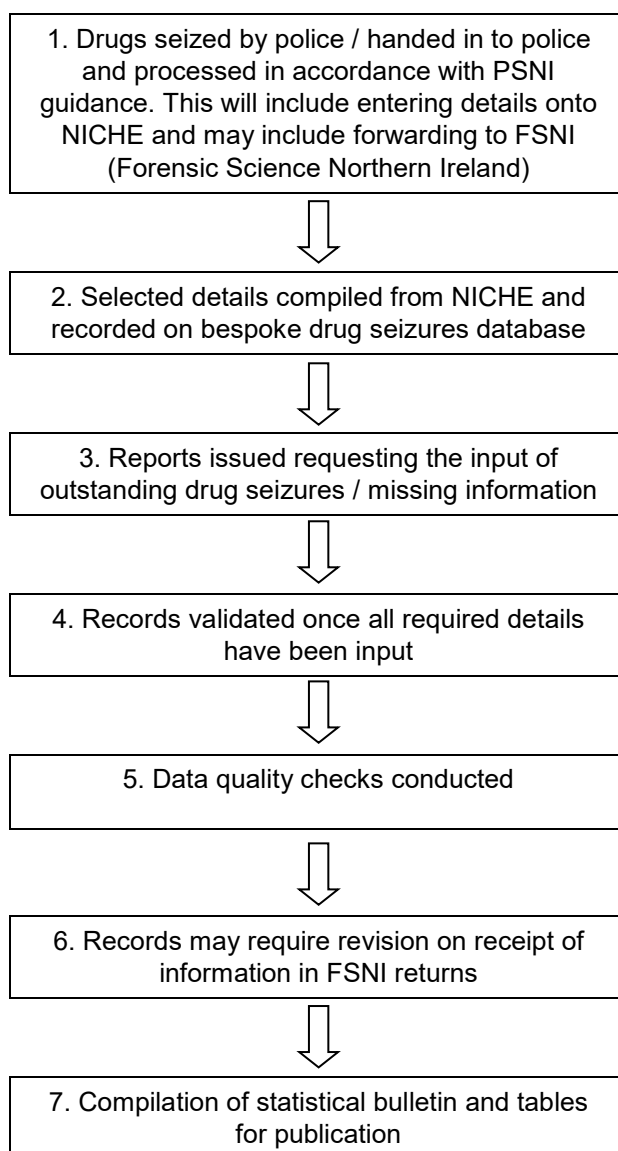
### 3.6 Data collection

Drug seizures and arrests are sourced through data held on NICHE, PSNI's record management system which has the purpose of custody processing, occurrence management and case management. Further information is available in [PSNI Official Statistics documentation, PDF 491KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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 NICHE.

Statistics on drug seizures are based on information extracted from NICHE and separately collated on a bespoke drug seizure 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 details relating to forensic examination.

The basic process from seizure to statistical publication goes through the following main stages.





## 3.7 Data completeness and quality

### 3.7.1 Drug seizures

When incident records are created, they are opened and closed with codes which indicate the nature of the incident. Where the incident includes the seizure of drugs, there are specific codes that should be applied to identify this aspect:

- DRGS – for use where a drug offence has occurred,
- DRUG – for capturing the characteristics of an incident where the use of drugs has featured.

A set of drug process codes are also available within NICHE to monitor and track seizures from initial creation of a drug seizure incident to the end of the process. These codes are used to identify seizure incidents where:

- no further details are required (further information indicates that either no drugs were seized or the drugs seized were not controlled under the MDA or PSA),
- the property details are completely missing or are incomplete,
- details have been input/updated on NICHE and are ready for input to the drug seizure database,
- drugs have been sent to FSNI for testing,
- the seizure has been 'validated' (all required information has been supplied and the record is available for inclusion in the published statistics).

As there are a number of risks associated with the data collection process, a range of data quality checks are in place to help mitigate these risks. These are primarily split into checks to improve the level of completeness of drug seizure incidents and checks to improve data quality/accuracy.

#### **Risk of incomplete data**

*Seizure incident not created* – check seizure details from press office reports and internal briefing documents to make sure seizure details are available on NICHE.

*Seizure details not input onto NICHE* – identify NICHE incidents with DRGS/DRUG codes but no drugs property details.

*Seizure details not input onto bespoke database as incorrect codes used* – identify NICHE incidents with drugs property details or a recorded drug offence where the details do not appear on the drug seizure database.

*Insufficient details available for validation of the seizure* – identify seizure records on the drug seizure database where required details are missing.

*Drug seizure details not available as the seizure is being processed by FSNI* – drug seizure incidents which are updated with a FSNI return are checked and the record updated on the drug seizure database as appropriate. In 2018/19 the validation window for drug seizures was extended for the first time to August 2019 to give additional time for FSNI returns to be received. This allowed a greater number of seizure incidents to be captured that previously would have been excluded from the data.

The NICHE drug process codes are updated on the basis of these checks, allowing an 'undercount' report of incomplete records to be compiled and issued service-wide on a regular basis for the appropriate action.

#### **Risk of inaccurate data**

A set of quality assurance checks are run on a regular basis to identify inaccuracies or inconsistencies in the drug seizure database such as:

- Invalid quantities/formats
- Incomplete or inconsistent seizure location details
- Seizures with large quantities
- Drug type not able to be classified by lookup table
- Seizure date is outside the current financial year
- Potential duplication

#### **Finalised data**

Before finalising financial year data, all quality checks must have been completed. While some seizure details will still be outstanding, the checking process will have minimised this as far as possible. The Home Office conversion factors are applied to the finalised drug seizure data using an automated process based on lookup tables and syntax.

### **Known quality issues and limitations**

As the drug seizures statistics are based on drug seizures that were recorded by the police, increases or decreases in the quantity and type of drugs seized can be affected by specific targeted police operations. This can contribute to variations in levels recorded i.e. increased police enforcement action can result in increased seizures and arrests.

Not all drugs and substances seized are tested to authenticate substances, either by using field test kits or being sent to FSNI. When testing is not applied, the drug seizures are classified in accordance with a police officer's assessment of the drug type seized, based on their experience and knowledge of the illegal drug trade in Northern Ireland and on information gathered in connection with the seizure.

Despite extending the validation window to increase the number of returns from FSNI available for inclusion in the finalised data, there will undoubtedly be a small proportion that will still remain outstanding by the cut-off date. The Home Office conversion factors cannot be applied to all drug types seized and so certain drug types are not able to be presented as converted quantities in the published data. The conversion factors were last updated in 2005 and the Home Office note that it is possible that some quantity data (especially for those drugs where quantity is reported in terms of doses) is not entirely accurate. However as the same conversion factors are used throughout the entire time series, the trends data can be considered reliable ([Seizures of drugs in England and Wales: user guide \(opens in a new window\)](#), see section 1.2 Quality and methodology limitations on seizing drugs in different preparation types, and section 3.8 Conversion factors).

Figures on seizures of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) should be treated with caution as the chemical identity of a seized drug is primarily based on an officer's assessment of the drug type seized, based on their experience and knowledge of the illegal drug trade in Northern Ireland. Forensic testing would be required to definitively say whether a seized drug suspected of being psychoactive is controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act or the Psychoactive Substances Act.

### **3.7.2 Drug-related arrests**

A lookup table of all relevant drug-related offence codes has been created in order to identify all custody records that include an arrest for a drug-related offence. Data quality checks that are carried out on the custody data extracts include making sure a custody record has not already been included in the figures for a previous financial year and checking the completeness of the geographic information.

#### **Known quality issues and limitations:**

Drug-related offences codes may indicate that a trafficking or possession offence is in relation to a Class A, Class B or Class C drug, however they do not indicate the specific type of drug. Therefore it is not possible to identify the number of arrests in relation to, for example, cocaine or cannabis.

## **3.8 Office for Statistics Regulation Quality Assurance of Administrative Data**

The Office for Statistics Regulation's Regulatory Standard [Administrative Data Quality Assurance Toolkit \(opens in a new window\)](#) has been used to ensure that users have been provided with as much information as possible and to make users aware of the quality and background of the statistics. The drug seizures and arrests statistics have been assessed that the level of quality concerns to be 'Medium' and that the public interest profile of the statistics can be considered 'Lower'. As a result it has been assessed that level [A1: Basic assurance](#) is suitable for the PSNI drug seizures and arrests statistics.

## **3.9 Data management**

The NISRA statisticians are based within PSNI and are given access to PSNI's internal systems, once they have been appropriately vetted and trained. Collaboration with operational colleagues is in place to address specific areas where expert and professional knowledge may be required, including IT colleagues, property managers, organised crime drugs leads, science and forensics colleagues. Any concerns or issues within specific areas are fed back when required through established channels. Access to systems and data extracts enables Statistics Branch to produce bulletins for publication and to respond to ad hoc requests for information. Further information is available in [PSNI Official Statistics documentation, PDF 491KB \(opens in a new window\)](#) Section 3 Data protection and confidentiality.

## **3.10 Timeliness**

A balance needs to be obtained between the requirement for figures to be as up-to-date as possible and the requirement to publish figures which are of appropriate quality and completeness for use. Figures within the

current financial year to date are provisional and remain subject to change until finalised figures for the full financial year are published in September/October of the following financial year. This is to allow time for drug seizures sent to FSNi towards the end of the financial year to be processed and reports returned. A substance that is not able to be identified or where sufficient details are not available at the time of data compilation will be excluded from the statistics.

### **3.11 Data availability**

Information that is published in the drug seizures and arrests bulletins has been examined to make sure it meets the quality and completeness appropriate for publication. Drug seizures and arrests are published at levels for which disclosure issues have been considered, including the geographic level at which the information is produced and also the length of time period covered. Further information is available in [PSNI Official Statistics documentation, PDF 491KB \(opens in a new window\)](#) Section 3 Data protection and confidentiality, Statistical disclosure control.

Any requests for types of data not included in the bulletins are assessed and responded to on a case by case basis. Where there is potential for placing additional data on the website, this will be taken forward. Where there are requests for types of information that would require additional processes to be put in place for gathering this information, these will be forwarded within PSNI for a decision on whether there is a business requirement to collect information in this format.

### **3.12 Publication**

Publication dates for drug seizures and arrests bulletins are pre-announced and can be found via the [Gov.uk Statistics: release calendar \(opens in a new window\)](#). A [publication schedule \(opens in a new window\)](#) is also available on the PSNI website. Provisional end of financial year drug seizures and drug arrest figures are published in April/May, with additional quarterly bulletins published in January, July and October. An annual publication released in September/October provides the finalised end of financial year figures and more information on trends of drug seizures and arrests.