



Police Recorded Drug Seizures And Arrests in Northern Ireland

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The number of drug seizure incidents recorded by the police has shown a mainly upwards trend since 2006/07.

Drug-related arrests generally increased between 2006/07 and 2019/20. A fall in each of 2020/21 and 2021/22 was followed by an increase in 2022/23.

In 12 months from 1st January 2023 to 31st December 2023:

- There were 8,281 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 327 (3.8 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- There was a rise in the number of Class A and Class C drug seizure incidents and a fall in the number of Class B seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A), benzodiazepines (Class C) and pregabalin (Class C).
- Seven policing districts showed a fall in the number of drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,474 drug-related arrests, an increase of 305 (9.6 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months.
- Ten policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests.

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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 bulletin is an Official Statistics publication meaning it complies with the [Code of Practice for Official Statistics](#) as follows:

- Trustworthiness: the statistics are impartial, independent and released in an open and transparent manner in accordance with a pre-announced publication schedule
- Quality: the statistics are produced using robust and relevant data sources which undergo continuous quality improvement and assurance checks
- Value: the statistics strive to meet user needs informed by ongoing feedback, providing sufficient detail which is widely accessible.

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 2023. Figures were compiled on 22 January 2024; as of that date 93% of seizure incidents for January 2023 to December 2023 have been fully validated; 7% 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 2023; this is particularly relevant for November 2023 and December 2023 which, respectively, have 13% and 22% of seizure incidents fully/partly outstanding at time of publication.

Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 31 March 2024 will be published May 2024. The PSNI website has a full [publication schedule \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Drug Seizure Incidents

Statistics in this publication relate to incidents 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 and drugs which are handed in to the police.

Also included within this publication is information on seizures of substances within the scope of the [Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 legislation \(PSA\) \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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. A more detailed definition is provided in Section 5 Trends in Drug-related Arrests.

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 [Drug Seizures and Arrests User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#) which accompanies this publication, and may be considered alongside this publication to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the drug situation in Northern Ireland.

Points to note

Other Agency Seizures: 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 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 [Drug Seizures and Arrests User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Geographic breakdown: Seizure incidents and arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. During the latest twelve months Belfast City policing district accounted for 33 percent of all drug seizure incidents and 41 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 2022/23 (8,933 seizure incidents) is almost three and a half times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590 seizure incidents).

Figure 1 Trends in drug seizure incidents since 2006/07

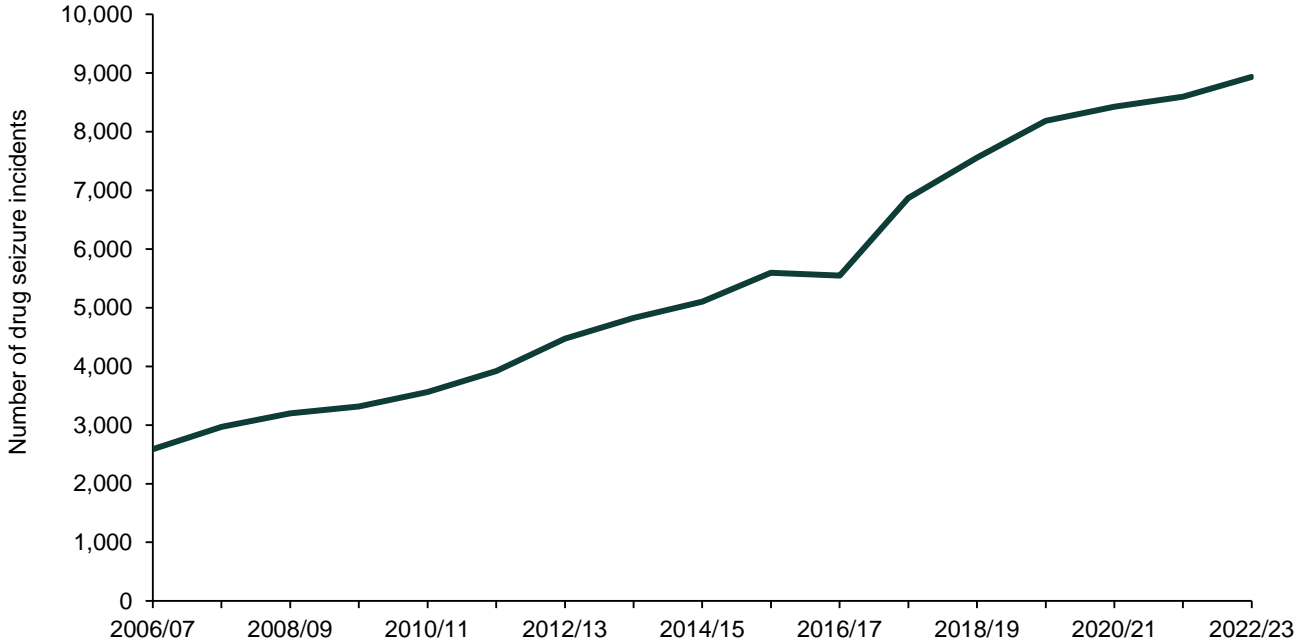
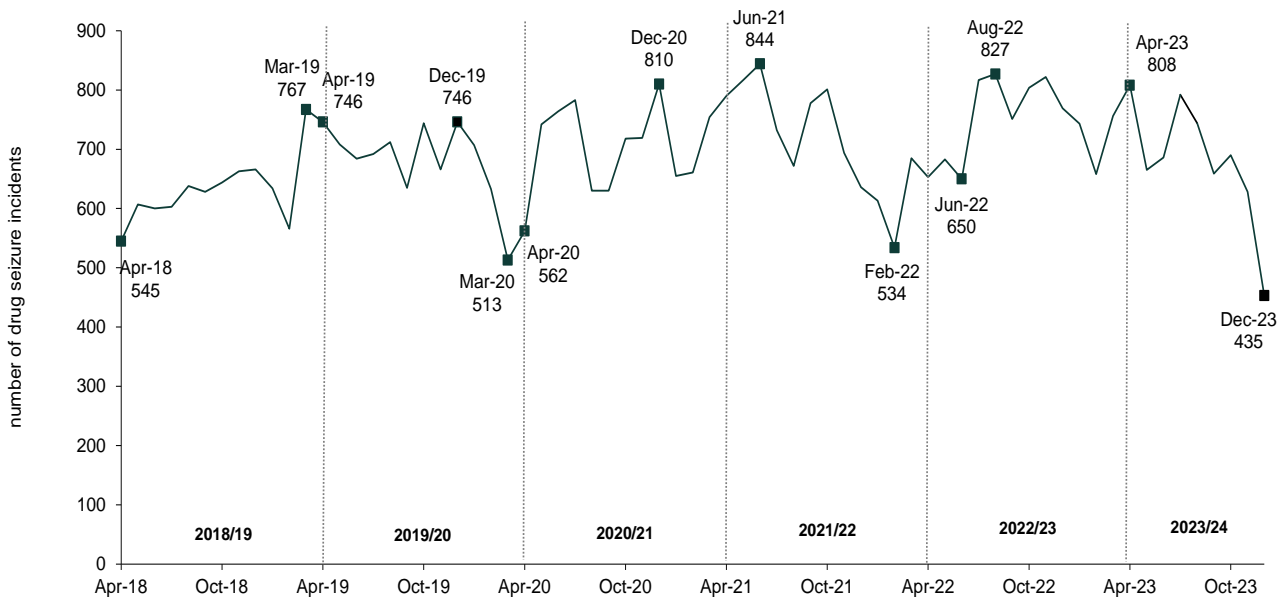


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2018. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures. Covid-19 legal restrictions were replaced by guidance on 15th February 2022. Page 2 provides information on the percentage of seizure incidents yet to be fully processed, particularly in relation to November and December 2023.

Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2018 to December 2023, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



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

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

In the 12 months from 1st January 2023 to 31st December 2023:

- There were 8,281 drug seizure incidents, a decrease of 327 (3.8 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 8,608 were recorded.
- There was a rise in the number of Class A and Class C seizure incidents, and a fall in the number of Class B seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A), benzodiazepines (Class C) and pregabalin (Class C). 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.
- The trend in drug seizure incidents is similar to that seen for the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period. Drug offence figures are available in the Pivot Table-Crime worksheet in the [Police Recorded Crime spreadsheet, monthly update to December 2023 \(opens in new window\)](#). 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 2023, particularly in respect to November 2023 and December 2023.

Details of the quantities of each drug type seized are available in Tables 4 and 5 of the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Figure 3 Drug seizure incidents January 2022 to December 2023

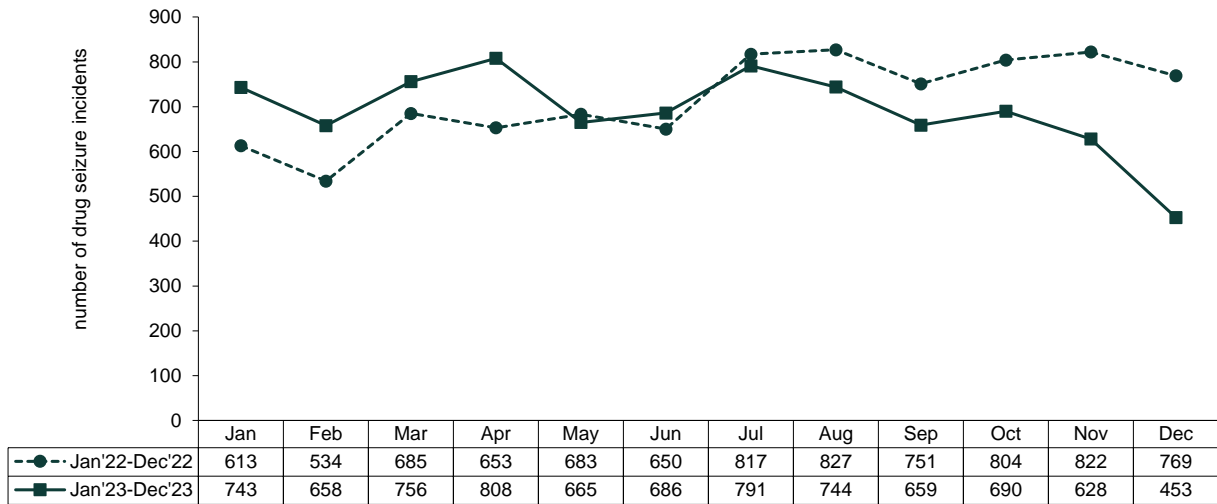


Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to December 2023 compared with the previous 12 months

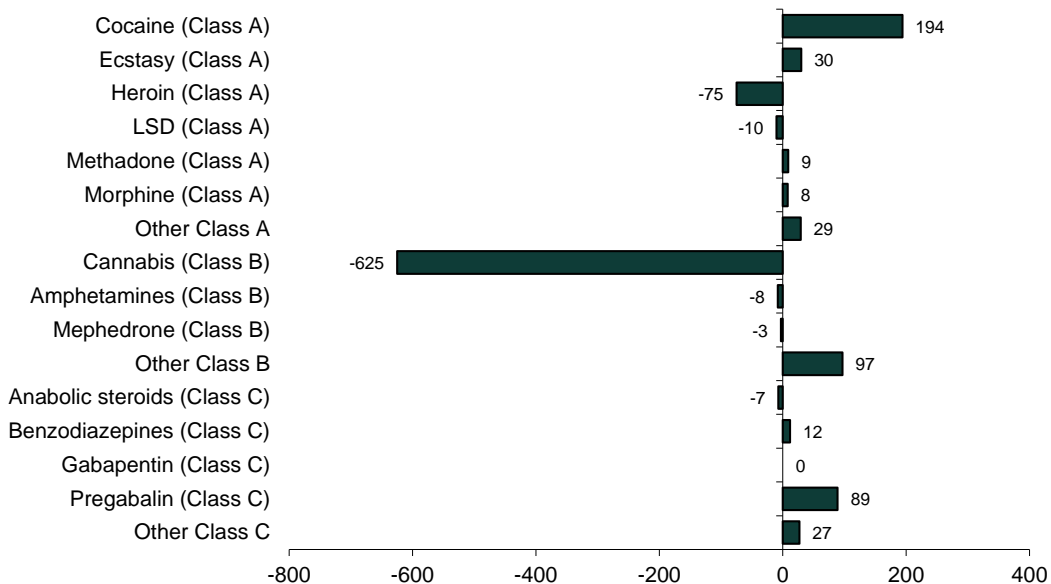


Table 1 Number of drug seizures¹ by class and drug type

Drug class ²	Drug type ²	Drug seizure incidents Jan'22-Dec'22	Drug seizure incidents Jan'23-Dec'23 ³	change
Class A	Cocaine	1,367	1,561	194
	Ecstasy	101	131	30
	Heroin	162	87	-75
	LSD	24	14	-10
	Methadone	9	18	9
	Morphine	12	20	8
	Other Class A ⁴	89	118	29
	All Class A	1,680	1,855	175
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	5,372	4,705	-667
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	229	183	-46
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	61	59	-2
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	655	673	18
	Total cannabis	5,935	5,310	-625
	Amphetamines	103	95	-8
	Mephedrone	7	4	-3
	Other Class B ⁵	206	303	97
	All Class B	6,096	5,548	-548
Class C	Anabolic steroids	42	35	-7
	Benzodiazepines	1,096	1,108	12
	Gabapentin	70	70	0
	Pregabalin	957	1,046	89
	Other Class C ⁶	232	259	27
	All Class C	1,973	2,067	94
All drugs	8,608	8,281	-327	

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 figures from 1st April 2023 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2022 to March 2023 were published in September 2023.

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, Nitrous Oxide and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

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 [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)]

Figure 5 Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to December 2023 compared with the previous 12 months



Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district ¹	Drug seizure incidents	Drug seizure incidents	change
	Jan'22-Dec'22	Jan'23-Dec'23 ²	
Belfast City	2,722	2,734	12
<i>East</i>	334	283	-51
<i>North</i>	799	871	72
<i>South</i>	1,074	983	-91
<i>West</i>	515	597	82
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	733	657	-76
Ards & North Down	375	498	123
Newry, Mourne & Down	754	701	-53
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	717	677	-40
Mid Ulster	540	474	-66
Fermanagh & Omagh	361	403	42
Derry City & Strabane	756	663	-93
Causeway Coast & Glens	460	379	-81
Mid & East Antrim	664	551	-113
Antrim & Newtownabbey	526	544	18
Northern Ireland	8,608	8,281	-327

¹ Seizure incidents are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for 33 percent 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 figures from 1st April 2023 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2022 to March 2023 were published in September 2023.

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. Arrest figures remain subject to change as persons may be re-arrested for additional offences on return to custody.

The number of arrests for drug offences increased in most of the years between 2006/07 and 2019/20, with falls experienced in 2014/15 (1.3 per cent) and 2016/17 (8.2 per cent). Subsequent falls have been recorded in each of 2020/21 (13.1 per cent) and 2021/22 (5.7 per cent), with a rise in 2022/23 (3.246) is nearly twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

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

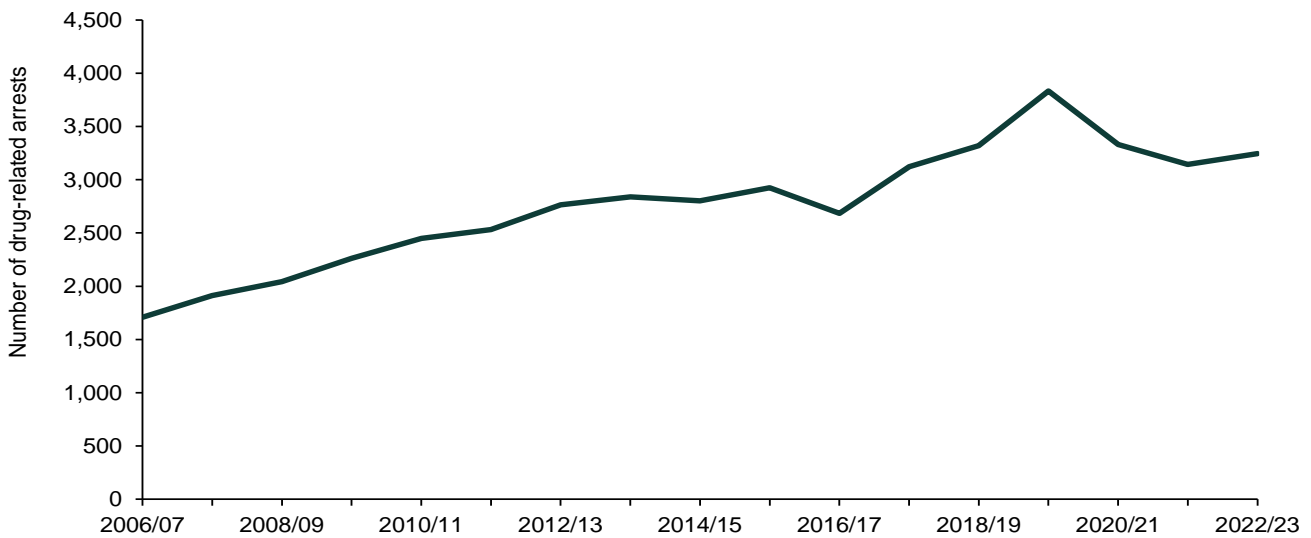
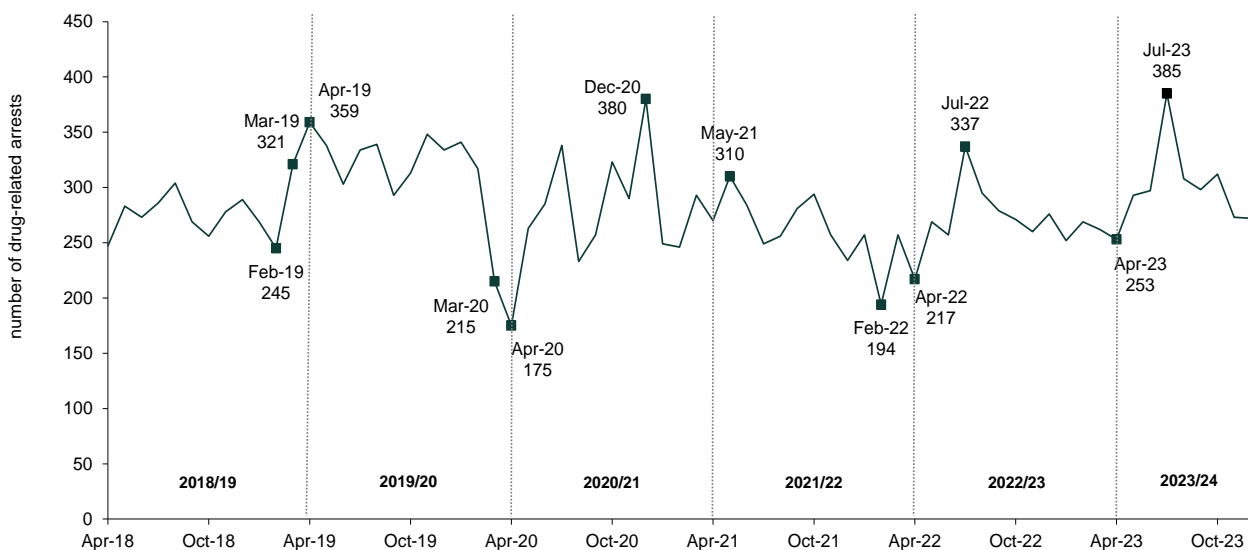


Figure 7 shows the pattern of drug related arrests each month since April 2018. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests. Covid-19 legal restrictions were replaced by guidance on 15th February 2022.

Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2018 to December 2023, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



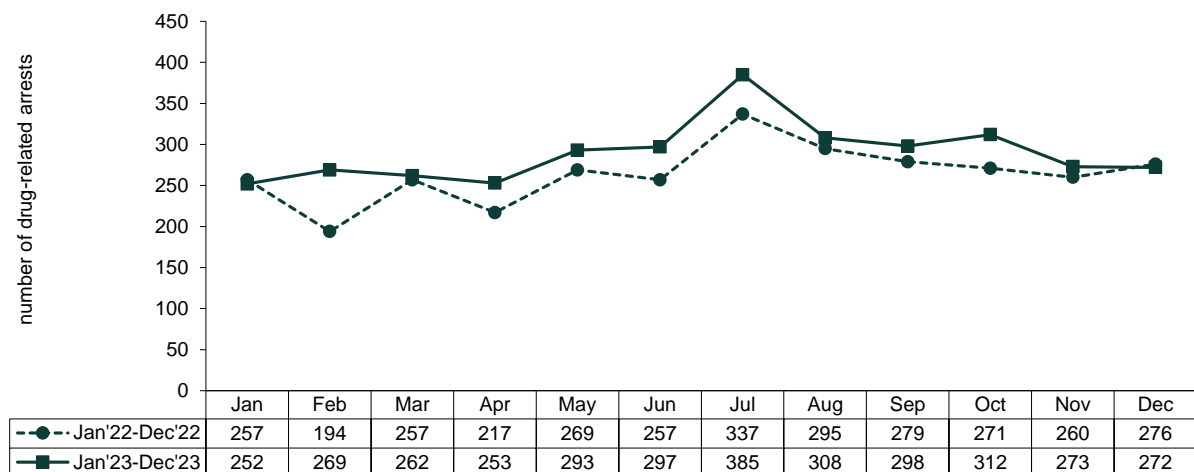
More detailed information on drug seizure trends is available in the [Annual Trends report \(opens in a new window\)](#) on the PSNI website.

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

In the 12 months from 1st January 2023 to 31st December 2023:

- There were 3,474 drug-related arrests, an increase of 305 (9.6 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)].
- Generally speaking the trend in drug-related arrests is fairly similar to that seen for the number of drug seizure incidents and drug offences recorded by police over the same time period. Drug offence figures are available in the Pivot Table-Crime worksheet in the [Police Recorded Crime spreadsheet, monthly update to December 2023 \(opens in new window\)](#).
- Drug-related arrests were higher in ten of the months between January 2023 and December 2023 when compared with the previous 12 month period, with February and July showing the highest increases of 75 and 48 respectively.
- There were two months that recorded falls in drug arrests between January 2023 and December 2023 when compared with previous 12 months. These were January and December which were lower by 5 and 4 respectively.
- There were 194 drug-related arrests in February 2022, which is the lowest monthly figure since April 2020 when there were 175 drug-related arrests. There were 385 drug-related arrests in July 2023 which along with the 380 drug-related arrests in December 2020, are the highest monthly figures recorded over the last 5 financial years.

Figure 8 Drug-related arrests January 2022 to December 2023



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

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, ten policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests. Belfast City showed the largest increase and accounted for two fifths of all drug-related arrests during the latest 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)].

Figure 9 Change in drug-related arrests by policing district, 12 months to December 2023 compared with the previous 12 months

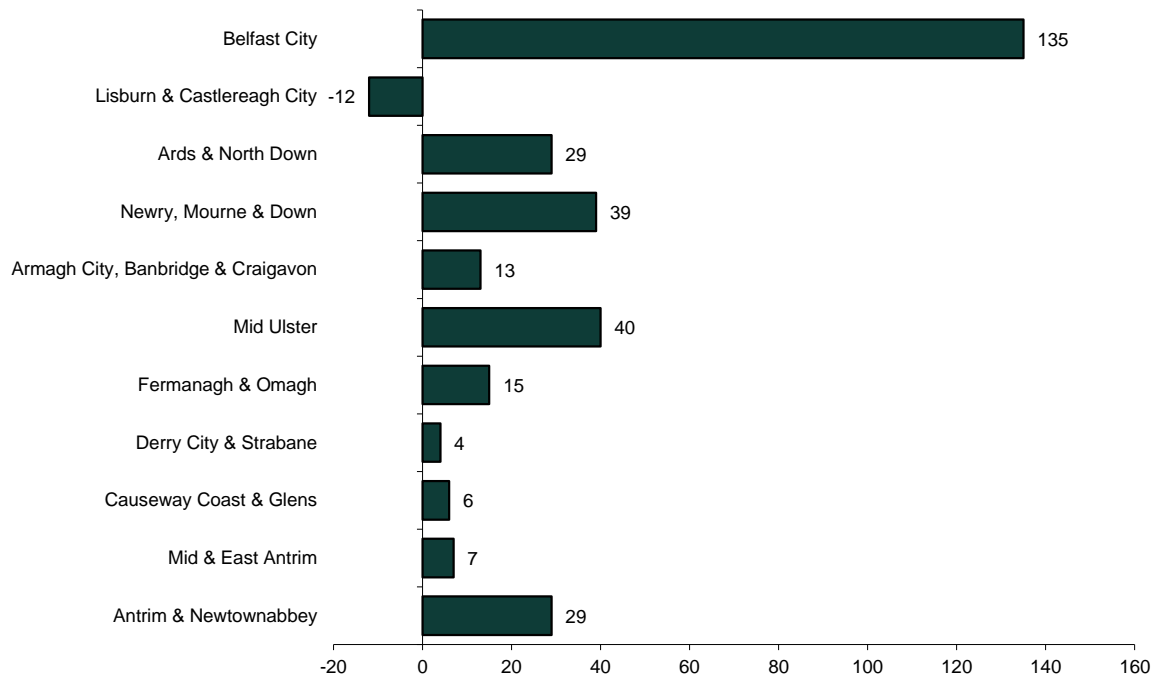


Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district

Policing district ¹	Drug-related arrests Jan'22-Dec'22	Drug-related arrests Jan'23-Dec'23 ²	change
Belfast City	1,298	1,433	135
<i>East</i>	167	167	0
<i>North</i>	359	458	99
<i>South</i>	541	554	13
<i>West</i>	231	254	23
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	222	210	-12
Ards & North Down	136	165	29
Newry, Mourne & Down	213	252	39
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	230	243	13
Mid Ulster	125	165	40
Fermanagh & Omagh	83	98	15
Derry City & Strabane	347	351	4
Causeway Coast & Glens	155	161	6
Mid & East Antrim	178	185	7
Antrim & Newtownabbey	182	211	29
Northern Ireland	3,169	3,474	305

¹ Drug-related arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounted for 41 per cent of all drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland during the 12 months to September 2023. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West).

² Arrest figures remain subject to change as persons may be re-arrested for additional offences on return to custody.

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 [Drug Seizures and Arrests User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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 in this [controlled drugs list \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Class A	Class B	Class C
Cocaine	Amphetamines	Anabolic Steroids
Ecstasy	Cannabis	Benzodiazepines ⁵
Heroin	Mephedrone	Pregabalin ³
LSD	Other Class B ²	Gabapentin ³
Methadone		Other Class C ⁴
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 Pregabalin and gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

⁴ Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/GBL, Nitrous Oxide and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

⁵ Flualprazolam, flunitrazolam and norfludiazepam were classified as Class C controlled substances in August 2021 and are recorded as Benzodiazepines.

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 the [Annual Trends report \(opens in a new window\)](#) on the PSNI website.

Publication

The PSNI website has a full [publication schedule \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Tables and charts in this bulletin are available on the PSNI website in the form of an accompanying [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to December 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#), which also provides additional levels of detail. It is available in both excel spreadsheet format and open document spreadsheet format.

Related information available on the PSNI website

[Police Recorded Crime Statistics \(opens in a new window\)](#). These statistics are updated on a monthly basis and a trends report is published annually

[Crime Outcomes \(opens in a new window\)](#). This annual publication summarises the outcomes that have been assigned to crimes recorded by the police since 2015/16.

Copies of other PSNI publications are available from the [PSNI website \(opens in a new window\)](#).