

# Perceptions of Sentencing: Findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey

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December 2022



Department of  
**Justice**

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt  
Máinnystrie O tha Laa

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This bulletin is available in the [Statistics and Research \(Opens in a new window\)](#) section on the Department of Justice website.

Feedback on this publication can be provided directly to Analytical Services Group at the email address listed above.

# 1 | Summary Findings

This bulletin presents findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) and focuses on respondents' perceptions of sentencing.

- Other than prison or a fine, when asked whether they had heard of certain sentences that are available when someone is found guilty of a crime at court, respondents were most likely to have heard of a suspended (93%) and a community sentence (85%).
- The majority of respondents (81%) believed courts should take into account the offender's circumstances (such as their age, criminal record, attitude, personal situation) when handing out a sentence.
- Findings suggest that 45% of respondents agreed that community sentences are an effective way of dealing with offenders. With regards to prison sentences longer than one year, 44% of participants were confident that spending part of a sentence in prison and part of it back in the community on licence is an effective way of dealing with those who have offended.
- Respondents were asked a set of five questions on the purposes of sentencing, more specifically whether or not they agreed it is important that sentencing achieves certain outcomes. Of the five outcomes asked about, participants were more likely to agree that it is important sentencing punishes the offender for the crime (85%) and protects the public (84%) and least likely to agree that rehabilitating the offender is important (63%).

## 2 | Introduction

### 2.1 The focus of this publication

This bulletin draws on findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS). This survey was formerly known as the Northern Ireland Crime Survey (NICS) but was renamed following a review in 2017/18.

NISCS is a representative, continuous, personal interview survey of the experiences and perceptions of crime of 3,710 adults living in private households throughout Northern Ireland.

Previously conducted on an ad hoc basis in 1994/95, 1998, 2001 and 2003/04, the survey began operating on a continuous basis in January 2005.

The focus of this publication is on a module contained within the NISCS relating to respondents' awareness and perceptions of different types of sentences for criminal offences. As part of the aforementioned review of the survey, this module was developed and asked for the first time in 2019/20 and will be included biennially thereafter.

Throughout this report key findings are commented on in the text, with numerical details on each section available in the relevant tables comprising the Tabular Annex (Appendix 1). Full detailed figures for this publication can be found in the accompanying Microsoft Excel and Open Data Source documents.

Further background information on this bulletin is available in the Technical Annex (Appendix 2). Additional NISCS 2019/20 reports have been published separately, including those related to [Experience of Crime \(Opens in a new window\)](#) (Campbell, Rice and Ross, February 2021), [Perceptions of Crime \(Opens in a new window\)](#) (Ross and Campbell, March 2021), [Perceptions of Policing and Justice \(opens in a new window\)](#) (Campbell, Ross and Rice, June 2021) and [Cyber Crime \(opens in a new window\)](#) (Ross, September 2022).

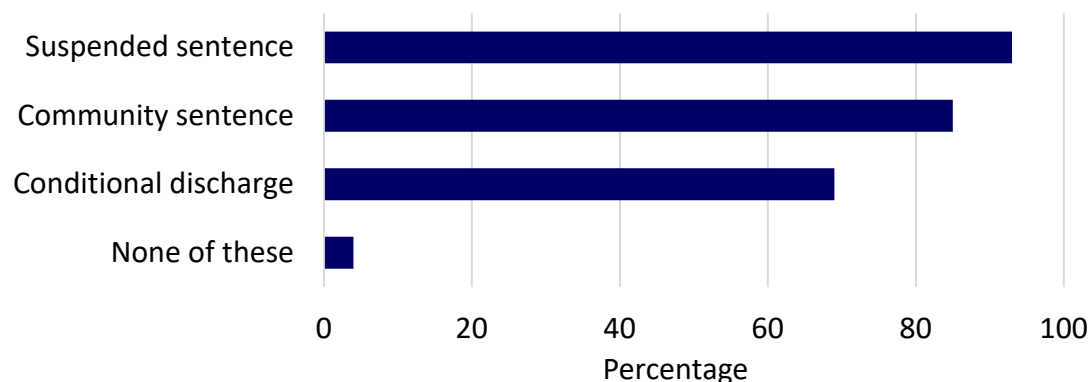
# 3 Awareness of Sentence Types and Sentencing Factors

## 3.1 Awareness of sentence types and sentencing factors

NISCS respondents were initially asked about their awareness of a number of sentence types. Referencing in the question that a number of sentences are available for those found guilty of a crime at court, such as prison or a fine, respondents were asked whether they had heard of any of the following three sentence types: suspended sentence; community sentence; and conditional discharge. A none of these option was also available. Results are presented in Table 1.

- Findings show that the vast majority had heard of a suspended sentence (93%) and a community sentence (85%). Just over two-thirds (69%) were aware of a conditional discharge while a substantially lower proportion, 4%, had not heard of any of the three sentences asked about.

Figure 3.1: Awareness of sentence types available (%), 2019/20

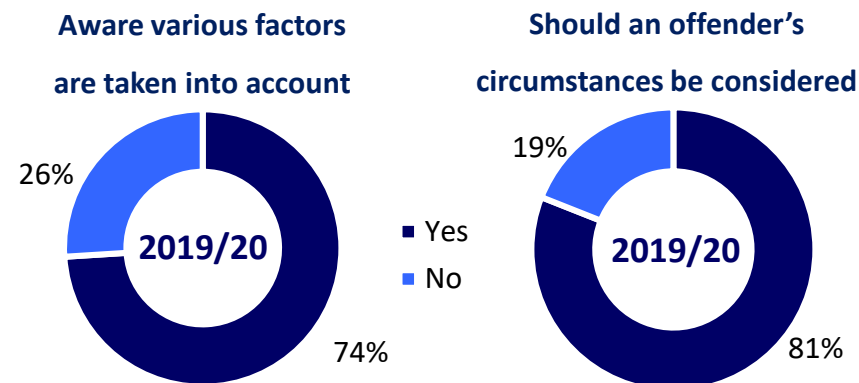


1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

Participants were then asked whether they were aware that, before the court can sentence an offender it must take into account a range of factors including the circumstances surrounding the case, the offender's circumstances and attitude and the impact the offence had on the victim. Views were also sought on whether the court should take into account the offender's circumstances (such as their age, criminal record, attitude, personal situation) when handing out a sentence. Yes/No response options were offered for each question. Figures for both are given in Table 2.

- Almost three quarters of respondents (74%) were aware that factors, such as the circumstances of the case and the impact on the victim, are taken into consideration prior to sentencing while just over four-in-five (81%) felt courts should consider the offender's circumstances when handing out a sentence.

Figure 3.2: Perceptions of factors and circumstances being taken into account when sentencing (%), 2019/20



1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

# 4 Perceptions of Community and Prison Sentences

## 4.1 Perceptions of community and prison sentences

Following a short introduction on community sentences and clarification on what they can involve, respondents were asked whether they believed community sentences were an effective way of dealing with offenders. Responses were based on a five point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

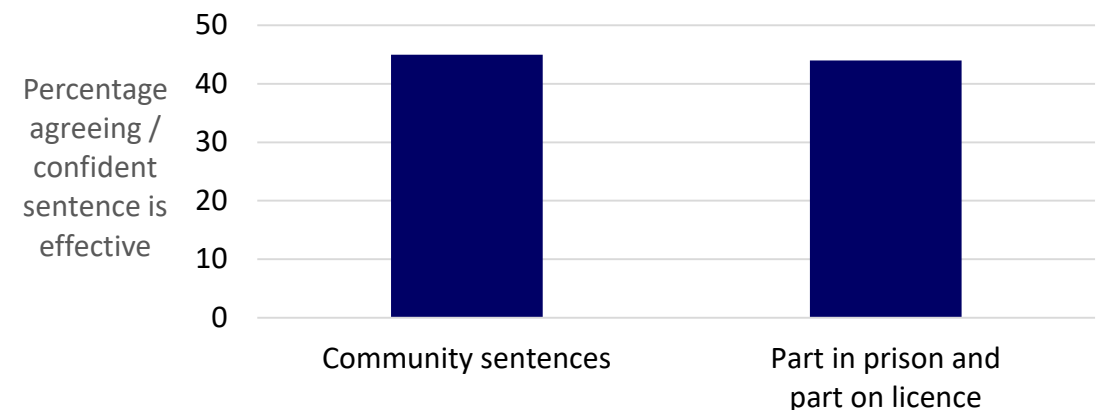
Similarly, a second statement was presented to respondents regarding prison sentences, outlining how sentences longer than one year include time spent in prison and time spent back in the community on licence, during which offenders are supervised and must comply with conditions. Participants were subsequently asked:

1. to what extent they agree or disagree that prison sentences should be reserved for dangerous offenders who have committed the most serious offences, using a five point scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree.
2. whether they were aware an offender could spend part of their sentence in prison and part of it back in the community on licence, offering the Yes/No response options.
3. how confident they are that spending part of a sentence in prison and part on licence is an effective way of dealing with offenders, using a four point scale from very confident to not at all confident.

Results can be found in Tables 3, 4 and 5.

- Results show that 45% of respondents agreed community sentences are an effective way of dealing with offenders, while a lower proportion, three-in-ten (30%), disagreed that they are effective.
- At 60%, participants were more likely to agree that prison sentences should be reserved for dangerous offenders while 29% disagreed that they should be reserved for those who committed the most serious offences.
- The vast majority, four-in-five (80%), were aware that an offender could spend part of their sentence in prison and part in the community, however, less than half (44%) of respondents were confident this was an effective way of dealing with those who had offended.

**Figure 4.1: Effectiveness of sentences (%), 2019/20**



1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

# 5 | Perceptions of the Importance of Sentencing

## 5.1 Importance of sentencing

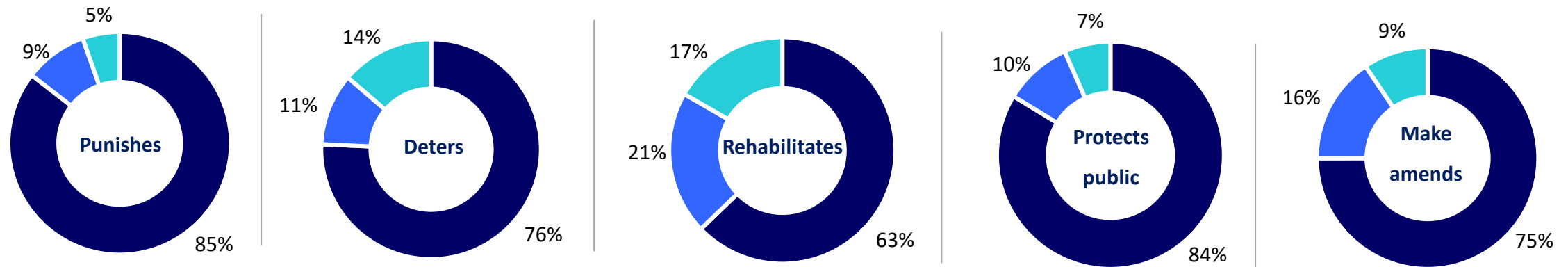
A set of questions was then asked of respondents regarding the purposes of sentencing and to what extent they agreed or disagreed that it is important sentencing:

1. punishes the offender for the crime
2. deters others from committing similar crimes
3. rehabilitates the offender (helping offenders to not re-offend)
4. protects the public
5. requires offenders to make amends for the harm caused, that is, to make up for any damage, injury or hurt caused to the victim(s) or make up for the offence generally, for example through unpaid work within the community where there is no specific victim(s).

Response options for all five questions were again based on the five point scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Results are presented in Table 6.

- At 85% and 84% respectively, results suggest that respondents were more likely to agree that it is important sentencing punishes the offender for the crime and protects the public. In contrast, participants were least likely to feel that it is important sentencing rehabilitates the offender with just over six-in-ten (63%) agreeing with the statement.

Figure 5.1: Importance of sentencing (%), 2019/20



1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

2. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

## Appendix 1: Tabular Annex

**Table 1: Awareness of sentence types available (%), 2019/20<sup>1</sup>**

Sentence type	Percentage who had heard of the sentence type
Suspended sentence	93
Community sentence	85
Conditional discharge	69
Heard of none of these	4
Unweighted base	3, 665

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

**Table 2: Perceptions of factors and circumstances being taken into account when sentencing (%), 2019/20<sup>1</sup>**

Percentage	Yes	No	Unweighted base
Aware that various factors are taken into account when sentencing an offender	74	26	3,664
Should courts take into account the offender's circumstances when handing out a sentence	81	19	3,620

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.



**Table 3: Perceptions of community and prison sentences (%), 2019/20<sup>1,2</sup>**

<b>Percentage saying</b>	<b>Community sentences are an effective way of dealing with offenders</b>	<b>Prison sentences should be reserved for dangerous offenders who have committed the most serious offences</b>
Agree	45	60
Neither agree nor disagree	25	10
Disagree	30	29
Unweighted base	3,630	3,666

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

**Table 4: Awareness a prison sentence could be spent part in prison and part on licence (%), 2019/20<sup>1,2</sup>**

<b>Aware (Percentage)</b>	<b>An offender could spend part of the sentence in prison and part back in the community on licence</b>
Yes	80
No	20
Unweighted base	3,665

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.
2. The question referenced sentences longer than one year.

**Table 5: Confidence in the effectiveness of part prison and part on licence sentences (%), 2019/20<sup>1</sup>**

Percentage saying	Spending part of the sentence in prison and part on licence is an effective way of dealing with offenders
Very or fairly confident	44
Not very or not at all confident	56
Unweighted base	3,561

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.

**Table 6: Perceptions of the importance of sentencing (%), 2019/20<sup>1,2,3</sup>**

Percentage saying it is important sentencing	Punishes the offender	Deters others from committing similar crimes	Rehabilitates the offender	Protects the public	Requires offenders to make amends for harm caused
Agree	85	76	63	84	75
Neither agree nor disagree	9	11	21	10	16
Disagree	5	14	17	7	9
Unweighted base	3,665	3,666	3,658	3,666	3,659

Source: Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey (NISCS) 2019/20

1. Results exclude don't knows and refusals.
2. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
3. Respondents were asked a set of questions about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that it is important sentencing leads to the above outcomes.

## Appendix 2: Technical Annex

### About the NISCS

Closely mirroring the format and core questions of the CSEW, the NISCS is an important source of information about community safety issues such as levels of, and public attitudes to, crime and anti-social behaviour. Its results play an important role in informing and monitoring government policies and targets. Within the [2016-21 Draft Programme for Government \(opens in a new window\)](#) (PfG) and the [Northern Ireland Civil Service Outcomes Delivery Plan \(opens in a new window\)](#), the Department of Justice lead on Indicator 1 related to reducing crime. Survey findings also informed the [Northern Ireland Policing Board's Strategic Outcomes for Policing in Northern Ireland 2016-2020 \(opens in a new window\)](#) (NIPB, 2016) and the [Annual Policing Plan 2019-20 \(opens in a new window\)](#) (NIPB, 2019).

An alternative, but complementary, measure of crime to offences recorded by the police, the main aims of the NISCS are to:

- measure crime victimisation rates experienced by people living in private households regardless of whether or not these crimes were reported to, or recorded by, the police;
- monitor trends in the level of crime, independent of changes in reporting levels or police recording practices;
- measure people's perceptions of and reactions to crime (for example, the level and causes of crime, the extent to which they are concerned about crime and the effect of crime on their quality of life);
- measure public confidence in policing and the wider criminal justice system; and
- collect sensitive information, using self-completion modules, on people's experiences regarding crime-related issues, such as domestic violence.

Recorded crime figures cannot, by their nature, provide an impression of the extent of concern about crime (often described as 'fear of crime') among different sections of the community. Hence, it is necessary to complement the police figures with information drawn from the NISCS, which, for the crime types it covers, provides a more complete measure of the extent and impact of crime against private households and their adult occupants. Further information on recorded crime statistics can be found in the [Police Service of Northern Ireland \(PSNI\) User Guide to Police Recorded Crime Statistics \(opens in a new window\) \(PDF, 1MB\)](#) (PSNI, 2018). While some of the core interviewer-administered modules for NISCS 2019/20 were (generally) based on CSEW 2019/20, some modification has been necessary to reflect local issues and the fact that the smaller NISCS sample size would not have generated robust results for follow-up questions asked of small sub-sections of the sample.

## Frequency and sample size of the NICS/NISCS

Initially, the then NICS was conducted on an ad hoc basis, before becoming a biennial survey in 2001. At that time, the Community Attitudes Survey (CAS) was also being conducted on a continuous basis, facilitating annual reports on topics linked to crime, policing and the criminal justice system. Increasingly, however, the CSEW was becoming a key vehicle to track progress against Public Service Agreement (PSA) and other targets related to the criminal justice and health sectors in England and Wales. Hence, interest increased among officials and Ministers in what the NICS had to offer in terms of direct comparison, while, in light of the improved security situation, many of the issues originally covered by CAS were becoming less relevant.

Accordingly, it was decided that a more effective use of resources would be to discontinue CAS at the end of 2003 and to move fieldwork for the NICS to a continuous basis with effect from January 2005. This would facilitate the monitoring of annual trends and more regular direct comparison with England and Wales. It was also decided to increase the target achieved sample size for the NICS from 3,000 to 4,000. This would contribute to increased accuracy of headline results and generate more robust analyses for various socio-demographic characteristics. However, unavoidable budgetary pressures resulted in the need to reduce the target achieved sample size; a moderate decrease was first made in year 2013/14, from 4,000 to 3,500, with a full sample reduction to 2,000 first being implemented in 2014/15. Following a review of the survey during 2017/18 (details of which can be found in the [Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#) section of the Department of Justice website), the target sample size has been increased with effect from April 2018 onwards. It is anticipated that around 3,500 interviews will now be achieved annually. Additional information, covering issues such as sampling design and methodology is available within the survey [User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#) (DoJ, 2022) and associated [Quality Report \(opens in a new window\)](#) (DoJ, 2019).

## Sampling and fieldwork

The initial NISCS 2019/20 sample consisted of 7,500 addresses, randomly selected from the NISRA Address Register (NAR). The NAR is developed within NISRA and is primarily based on the Land and Property Services (LPS) POINTER database. Visits to each address by an interviewer from the NISRA Central Survey Unit resulted in an eligible sample of 6,576 occupied addresses, from which attempts were made to interview one randomly selected adult respondent at each address.

Selecting only one person at each address means that individuals living in large households have a lower chance of being included in the sample than those living in small households. Accordingly, the data presented in this publication have been weighted by household size to prevent a bias towards small household sizes.

In January 2005, the then NICS began operating on a continuous basis. This bulletin refers primarily to fieldwork undertaken during the financial year 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2020, which involved complete interviews with 3,710 people aged 16 years and over. This represents an eligible response rate of 56%.

Respondents were assured in advance of the interviews that any information they provided would be treated as entirely confidential and that the level of detail produced in publications or in any subsequent analyses would not allow for identification of individuals. The interviews typically lasted under an hour for non-victims, although those involving respondents who disclosed several crimes could last much longer.

### **Rounding, error and statistical significance**

Don't knows, refusals and non-valid responses have been excluded from the analyses. Percentages may not always sum to 100 or numbers may not sum to an overall total due to the effect of rounding. Full unrounded figures are available in the accompanying Microsoft Excel and Open Data Source versions of the Tabular Annex.

Due to a combination of both sampling and non-sampling error, any sample is unlikely to reflect precisely the characteristics of the population. Because NISCS estimates are subject to sampling error, differences between estimates from successive years of the survey or between population subgroups may occur by chance. For the purposes of the survey, where differences emerge as being statistically significant, these are reported at the 5% ( $p < 0.05$ ) level of probability (two-tailed tests). This means that, for any observed result that is found to be statistically significant, one can be 95% confident that this has not happened by chance.

As a result of the sample reduction in recent years, the respective confidence limits of any percentages from the survey were wider than was the case previously and the margin of difference between findings required to achieve 'statistical significance' was widened accordingly. This means that absolute differences in percentages which would previously have been 'statistically significant' with the larger numbers then sampled (and the much narrower range of error for any findings) may not necessarily be found to be statistically significant with the reduced sample size. This should be borne in mind when considering any long-term trends presented in survey tables.

Further information on the 2019/20 sweep of the NISCS is contained within the NISCS 2019/20 Technical Report (forthcoming, via the [Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#) section of the Northern Ireland Department of Justice website).

## Appendix 3: National Statistics Status



National Statistics status means that our statistics meet the highest standards of trustworthiness, quality and public value, and it is our responsibility to maintain compliance with these standards.

The designation of these statistics as National Statistics was confirmed in July 2020 following a [Compliance Check \(opens in a new window\)](#) by the [Office for Statistics Regulation \(opens in a new window\)](#). NISCS statistics last underwent a [full assessment \(opens in a new window\)](#) against the [Code of Practice \(opens in a new window\)](#) in 2012/13.

As part of the recent compliance check, we have made the following improvements:

- published a [Future Programme of Work \(opens in a new window\)](#) that details the list of developments that the department plan to scope in terms of feasibility of implementation.

## Appendix 4: References

Campbell, P, Rice A and Ross, K. (2021) [Experience of Crime: Findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#). DoJ Research and Statistical Bulletin. Belfast: DoJ

Campbell, P, Ross K and Rice, A. (2021) [Perceptions of Policing and Justice: Findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#). DoJ Research and Statistical Bulletin. Belfast: DoJ

Department of Justice (2022) [Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Department of Justice (2019) [Northern Ireland Crime Survey Quality Report \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Northern Ireland Executive (2016) [Programme for Government 2016-21 and Outcomes Delivery Plan \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Northern Ireland Policing Board (2019) [Annual Policing Plan 2019-20 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Northern Ireland Policing Board (2016) [Strategic Outcomes for Policing in Northern Ireland 2016-2020 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) [Crime in England and Wales: year ending March 2020 \(opens in a new window\)](#)

Police Service of Northern Ireland (2018) [User Guide to Police Recorded Crime Statistics in Northern Ireland \(opens in a new window\) \(PDF, 1MB\)](#) (Updated January 2018)

Ross, K (2022) [Cyber Crime: Findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#). DoJ Research and Statistical Bulletin. Belfast: DoJ

Ross, K. and Campbell, P. (2021) [Perceptions of Crime: Findings from the 2019/20 Northern Ireland Safe Community Survey \(opens in a new window\)](#). DoJ Research and Statistical Bulletin. Belfast: DoJ