

FIRST TIME ENTRANTS TO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2021-22

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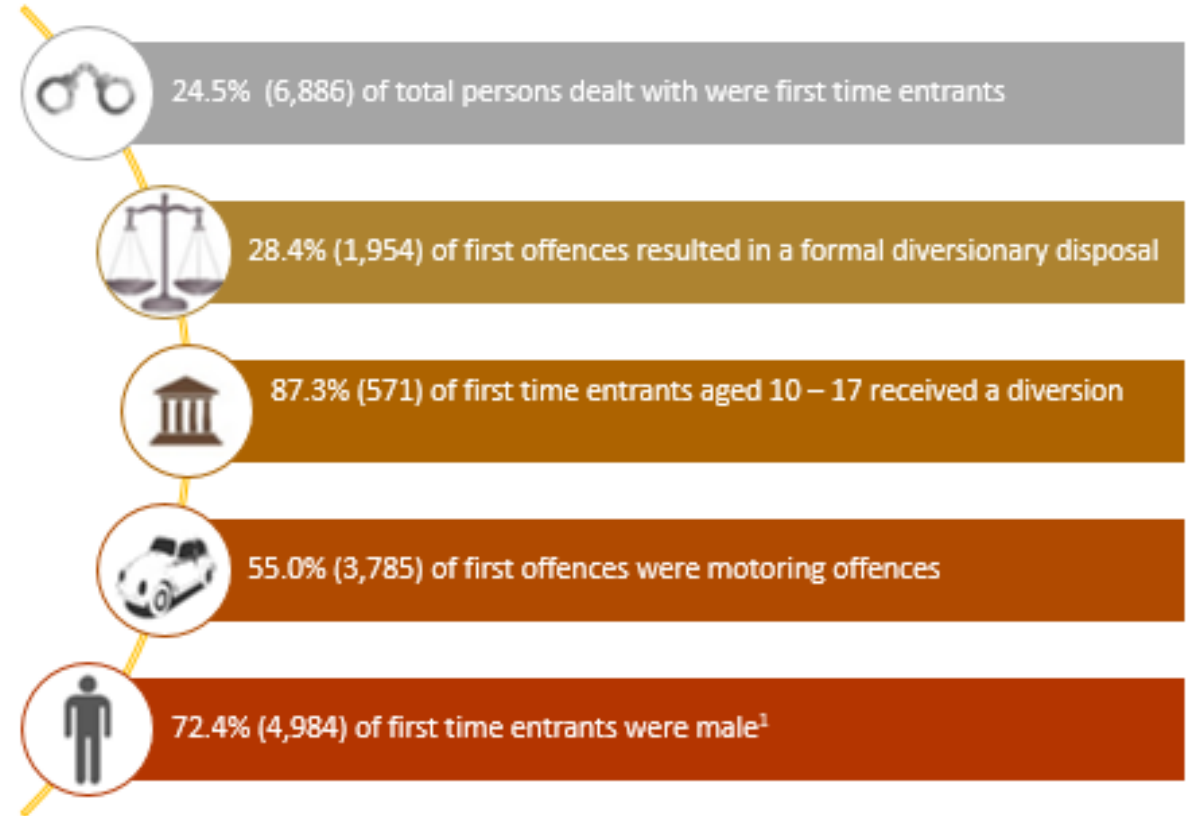
Key Findings

1.1 About this bulletin

This bulletin presents information on first time entrants to the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. As well as details on demographic makeup, the bulletin also presents analysis on disposals received (see Interpreting the Data section in Appendix 1).

Completion of cases in the justice system in 2020/21 was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and this is reflected in the numbers recorded in this bulletin.

Main Points in 2021-22



¹ Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified.

1 | Key Findings

1.2 Overall

- In 2021/22, 28,154 offences were recorded as dealt with by conviction or diversion in the justice system in Northern Ireland. Of these, 24.5% (6,886) were first offences. The comparative figure for 2020/21 was 22.4%.
- Of first offences, 28.4% (1,954) were dealt with by formal diversionary disposal and 71.6% (4,932) by conviction.

1.3 Age Group and Gender

- Of all first time entrants in 2021/22, 9.5% (654) were aged 10 to 17 and 28.4% (1,954) were aged 18 to 24.
- First offences accounted for 52.3% (1,954) of all instances where a diversionary disposal was issued. Those in the age range 10 to 17 were most likely (87.3%, 571 out of 654) to receive a diversion for a first offence.
- Of all offences committed by males¹ and dealt with by conviction or diversion, 21.7% (4,984) were first offences; the comparative figure for females was 36.9% (1,902).

1.4 Offence Type and Disposals Received

- Over half, 55.0% (3,785) of all first offences in 2021/22 were motoring offences. Of all instances where a conviction or diversion was issued for offences in that category, 32.8% were for first offences.
- Monetary disposals made up 57.0% (3,923) of all disposals for first offences in 2021/22. First offences accounted for 28.7% of all instances where a monetary penalty was imposed in relation to a conviction or diversion. Of all instances where imprisonment was imposed as a penalty, first offences accounted for only 5.8% (174 out of 3,026).
- 52.3% (1,954) of all cases dealt with by diversion were for first offences. Of first offences dealt with by diversion, 72.0% (1,407) were dealt with by way of caution. However, while 51.2% of all cautions were for first offences, 85.1% (252) of all informed warnings issued were for first offences.

¹ Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified.

2 | Introduction

2.1 About this report

In the 2011-16 Programme for Government, the Minister outlined a commitment to reduce the level of serious crime by reshaping the approach used to tackle factors leading to criminal behaviours within Northern Ireland. A commitment was given to monitor the number of young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time.

This bulletin, produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics, presents data on first time entrants to the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022. It provides an overview of the structure of the known offending population in 2021-22, along with information on the breakdown of offences committed by new offenders and the disposals received. Comparative information with the previous year is also provided.

Details of methodology, data coverage and quality are detailed in Appendix 1.

Data in all tables and charts in the bulletin, along with supplementary data, are available from the Department of Justice website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#). The next update covering the 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 will be published in July 2024. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the Department of Justice website.

The data underpinning this report are sourced from those compiled in the production of an annual Prosecution, Convictions and Out of Court Disposals report, taking data on convictions and out of court diversionary disposals each year and merging it with a historical disposals file. As the Prosecutions bulletin is produced on a calendar year basis, the publication of first time entrants data is delayed until publication of prosecutions data for the entire period to be reported on has been completed.

3 Findings

3.1 Overview

In 2021-22, a total of 28,154 (first and further) offences were recorded as dealt with by conviction or diversion in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, fewer than the total number (21,437) in the previous year. This increase in cases completed reflects the recovery of the justice system from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020-21, when court sittings were suspended for a period and the justice system as a whole did not operate at its full capacity.

3.2 First time entrants

Of total offences, 6,886 (24.5%) were first and 21,268 (75.5%) were further offences. As detailed in the counting rules in Appendix 1, the number of first offences equates directly to the number of first time entrants to the justice system. The number of first time entrants (first offences) in 2021-22 therefore was 6,886 (24.5% of all offences), an increase of 2.1 percentage points on the previous year (4,799 first offences; 22.4% of all offences). Over the period 2012-13 – 2021-22, for all cases disposed through the courts or via out of court diversionary disposals, the proportion of first time entrants has decreased from 31.2% to 24.5% (Table 1).

Table 1: First time entrants to the justice system as percentage of all offenders dealt with at court or by formal diversionary disposal 2012-13 to 2021-22

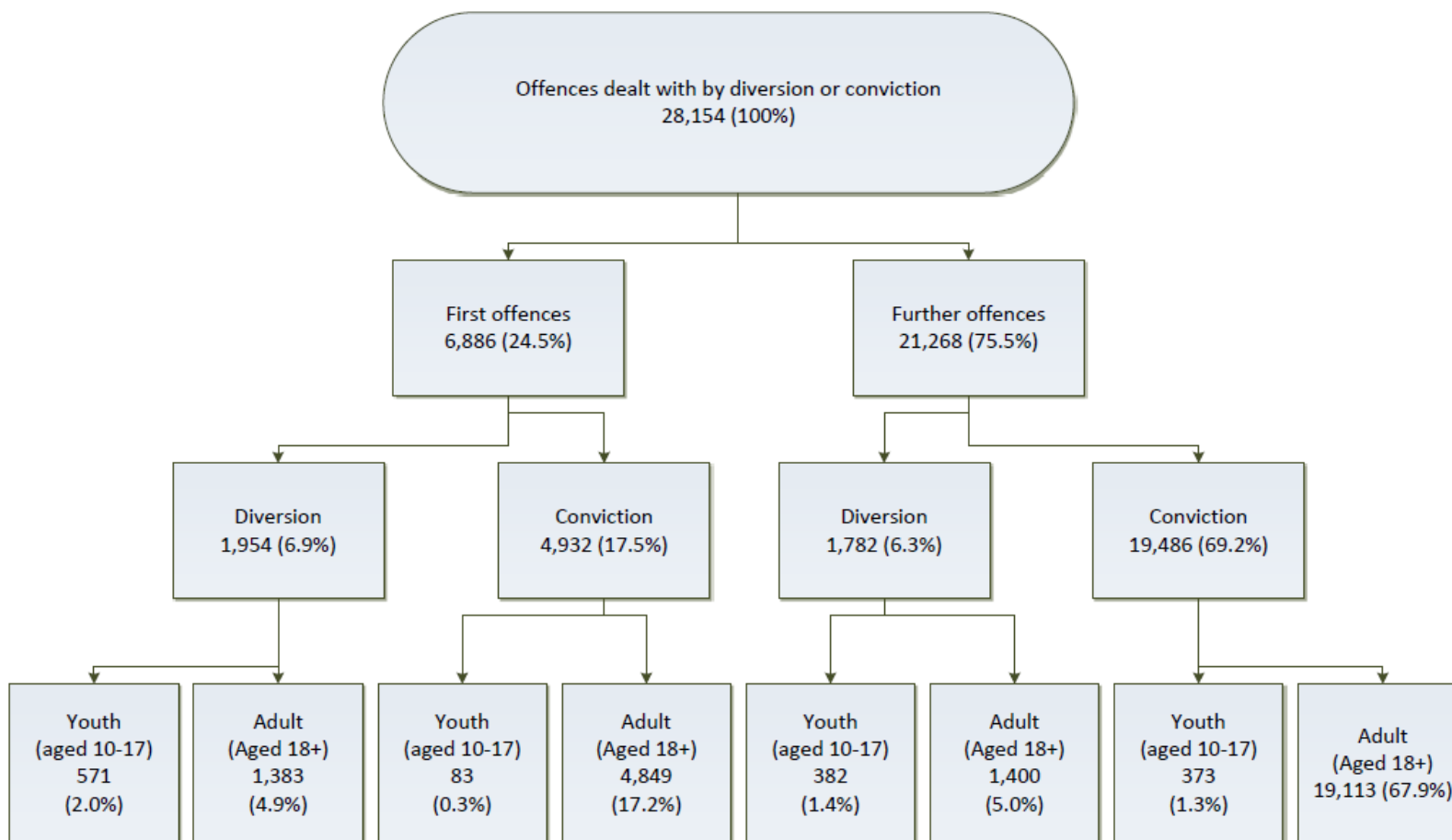
Year	Percentage first time offenders
2012/13	31.2
2013/14	31.7
2014/15	30.4
2015/16	30.4
2016/17	29.8
2017/18	29.3
2018/19	27.2
2019/20	26.8
2020/21	22.4
2021/22	24.5

3.3 Conviction and diversion breakdown

Of all offences, 13.3% (3,736) were dealt with by diversion, and 86.7% (24,418) by conviction. Corresponding figures for all first offences were 28.4% (1,954) and 71.6% (4,932) respectively.

3 Findings continued

Figure 1: First offences and further offences of all offenders [see note below]



[Note]: The percentages shown in the diagram relate to the total number of offences committed in the top box in the figure.

3 Findings by Age

3.4 Age Group

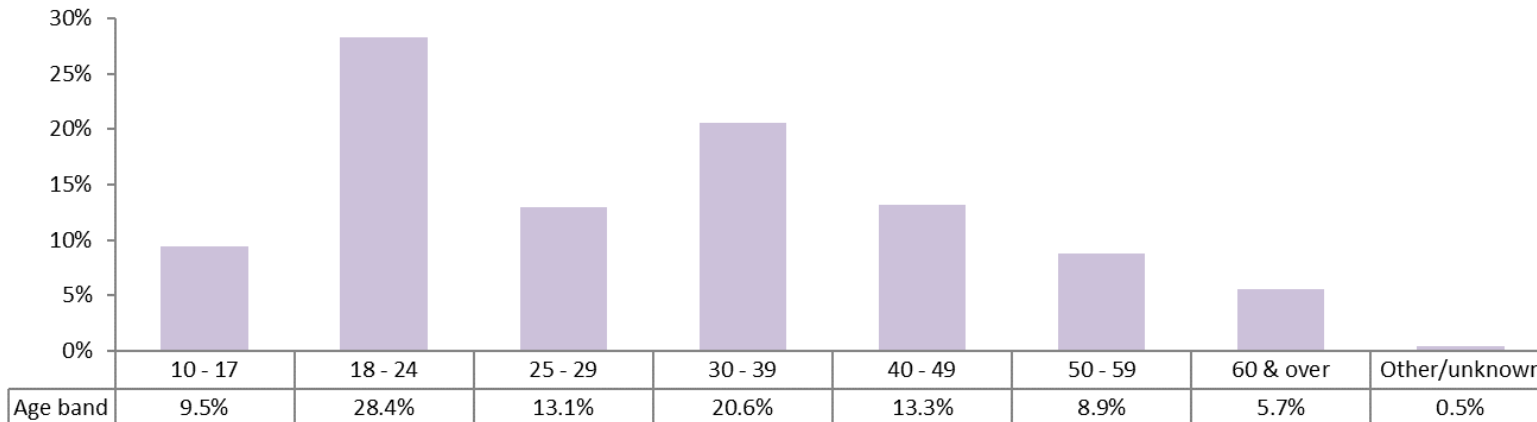
In 2021-22, young people aged 10-17 committed 9.5% of all first offences (654 out of 6,886 first offences) and 3.5% of all further offences (755 out of 21,268 further offences). They received 25.5% (953) of all diversionary disposals and 1.9% (456) of all convictions.

Of all proven convictions and diversions for this age group, 46.4% (654) were first offences. This age group accounted for 29.2% (571) of all diversions for first offences and 1.7% (83) of all convictions for first offences (Tables 1a, 1c and 1d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2021-22, 32.7% (1,954) of first offences were by those aged 18 to 24 years old. Of this number, 30.1% (588) were dealt with by way of diversion; 57.1% of all diversions for this age group were for first offences. While 32.8% (310) of convictions for those aged 60 and over were for first offences, only 6.3% of all convictions for first offences were attributable to this group (Tables 1c and 1d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

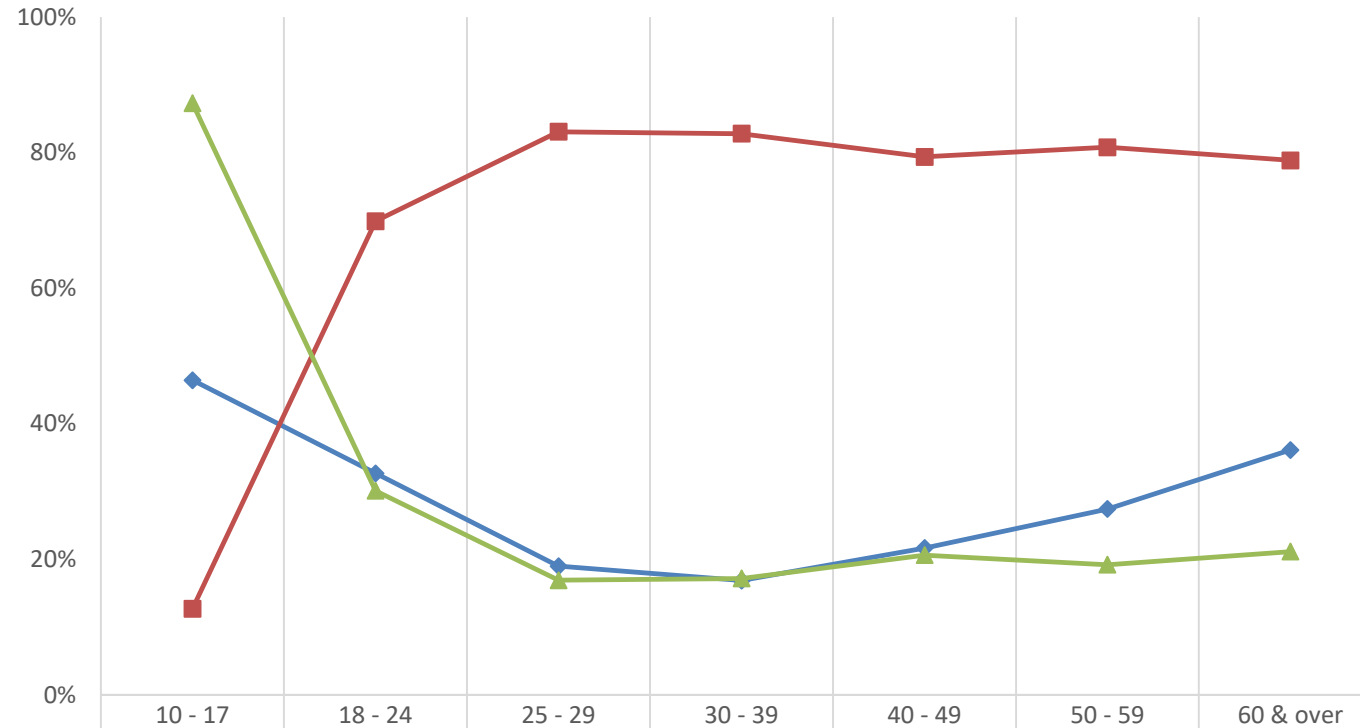
The rate of first convictions in 2021-22, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 24.4% (5,953) overall (compared with 26.2% in 2020-21). This compares to a rate of 20.2% (4,932) for convictions for first offences only (up from 18.6% in 2020-21).

Figure 2: First offences by age band



3 Findings by Age Continued

Figure 3: First offences as percentage of first/all convictions and diversions by age band



◆ first offences as % of all disposals (convictions and diversions)	46.4%	32.7%	19.0%	16.9%	21.6%	27.4%	36.1%
■ convictions for first offences as % of all disposals for first offences	12.7%	69.9%	83.1%	82.8%	79.4%	80.8%	78.9%
▲ diversions for first offences as % of all disposals for first offences	87.3%	30.1%	16.9%	17.2%	20.6%	19.2%	21.1%

3 Findings - Gender

3.5 Gender

In 2021-22, 21.7% (4,984) of all offences by males dealt with by conviction or diversion were first offences, compared to 36.9% (1,902) by females. Of all first offences dealt with by diversion or conviction, 72.4% were by males, compared to 27.6% by females (Table 2a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2021-22, 50.0% (1,386) of all diversions issued to males² were for first offences, while 17.8% (3,598) of all convictions handed down to males were for first offences. The rate of first convictions, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 21.7% (4,399) for males (Tables 2b, 2c and 2d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

For females, 58.8% (568) of all diversions were for first offences and 31.9% (1,334) of all convictions were for first offences. The rate of first convictions in 2021-22, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 37.1% (1,554) for females (Tables 2b, 2c and 2d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

² Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified.

3.6 Offence Categories

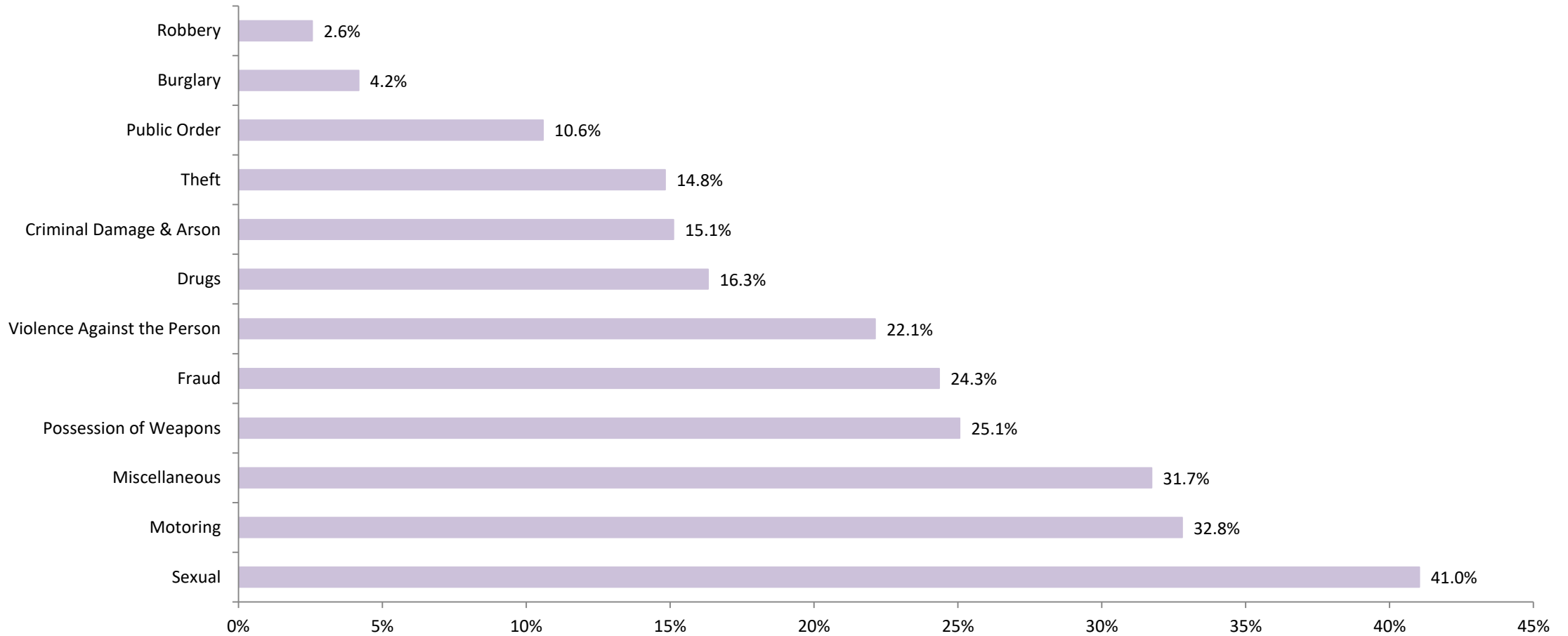
Of all first offences dealt with by way of diversion or conviction, 55.0% (3,785) were for motoring offences, 15.3% (1,053) for violence against the person (VAP), 8.7% (602) for drugs and 5.5% (376) for offences in the miscellaneous category (Figure 4; Table 3a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2021-22, sexual (41.0%, 119), motoring (32.8%, 3,785), offences in the miscellaneous crimes against society category (31.7%, 376) and possession of weapons (25.1%, 98) were the offence classifications where first offences made up the largest proportion of the total convictions and diversions. Public order (10.6%, 241 cases), burglary (4.2%) and robbery (fewer than 3 cases) were the lowest (Figure 5; Table 3a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

The offence categories where first offences were dealt with mainly by diversion in 2021-22 were possession of weapons (79.6%, 78), public order (71.0%, 171), drugs (70.9%, 427), criminal damage & arson (62.6%, 149), theft (58.0%, 145) and VAP (51.0%, 537). Conversely, first offences in the motoring (92.8%, 3,512), sexual (86.6%, 103), burglary (81.8%, 9) and miscellaneous crimes against society (66.8%, 251) categories were mostly dealt with by conviction in 2021-22 (Table 3e in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

3 Findings – Offence Categories continued

Figure 4: First offences as percentage of all convictions and diversions by offence classification



3 Findings – Disposal Type

3.7 Disposal Type

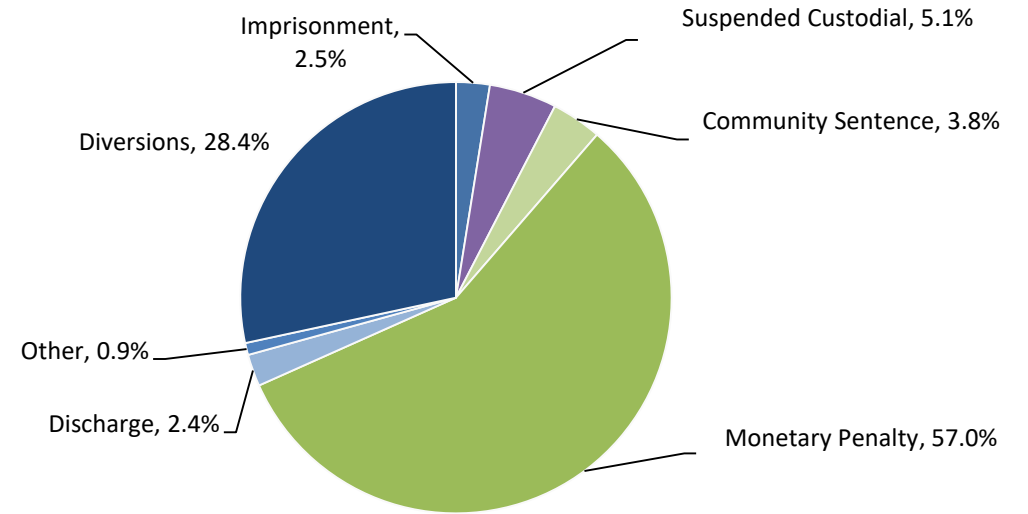
Of all first offences in 2021-22, 28.4% (1,954) were dealt with by way of diversion, compared to 28.9% (1,389) in the previous year. Diversions accounted for 13.3% of all disposals in 2021-22, whether for first offences or further offences dealt with by diversion or conviction.

Monetary penalties were imposed for 57.0% (3,923) of first offences and first offences accounted for 28.7% of those receiving a monetary penalty upon conviction, less than the 29.2% recorded in 2020-21. Imprisonment disposals were the outcome in relation to only 2.5% (174) of all first offences. In fact, only 5.8% of all imprisonment disposals in 2021-22 were for first offences.

Suspended custodial disposals were imposed in relation to 5.1% (349) of all first offences, though, of those offences for which a suspended custodial disposal was the outcome, 8.8% were for first offences.

Community sentences were imposed in 3.8% (259) of disposals for first offences and, of those offences for which a community sentence was the outcome, 9.8% were for first offences (Table 4a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 5: First offences by disposal type



For first offences dealt with by diversion in 2021-22, most were dealt with by way of caution (72.0%, 1,407). PPS ordered youth conference plans (15.1%, 295) and informed warnings (12.9%, 252) accounted for substantially smaller proportions of the total.

First offences made up 85.1% (252 out of 296) of all informed warnings issued in 2021-22. This compares to 51.2% (1,407 out of 2,748) of cautions and 42.6% (295 out of 692) of PPS ordered youth conference plans (Table 4d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

4 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Who are first time entrants to the criminal justice system?

Within this publication, first time entrants to the criminal justice system are those who are recorded as having committed a proven first offence, whether it was dealt with by way of diversionary disposal or by conviction. The term ‘first time entrants’ equates directly to that of ‘first offence’, the phraseology used to describe data presented within this document. In order to calculate the proportion of first time entrants, information is also provided for ‘further offences’. Note that, under counting rules for this publication, ‘further offences’ do not relate directly to the number of offenders who have committed further offences, as an offender may have had more than one further conviction or diversionary disposal within the time period covered by the report.

4 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

What counts as a first or further offence?

An offence is defined as a ‘first offence’ if it results in the offender receiving their first diversion, warning, caution or conviction – i.e. they have no previous criminal record in Northern Ireland. Offences resulting in further diversions, warnings, cautions or convictions are known as ‘further offences’, since the offender already has a recorded criminal history.

Where an offender has had a diversion imposed, been warned, cautioned or convicted of several offences on the same occasion, only one offence, the principal offence, is counted (whether this is in relation to a first offence or, for the purposes of this bulletin, to a further offence). The basis for selection of the principal offence is laid down in rules issued by the Home Office; the Department of Justice has developed a [methodology](#) applicable to Northern Ireland based on these.

Out of court disposals not taken into account in this bulletin are Penalty Notices for Disorder (PNDs). PNDs are a fixed penalty designed to tackle low-level, anti-social and nuisance offending for offenders aged 18 and over and are issued for a range of minor offences. They were introduced in Northern Ireland on the 6th June 2012 as a result of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. PNDs provide police with a swift financial punishment to deal with misbehaviour and a practical deterrent to future re-offending. However, they do not require an admission of guilt and do not form part of an individual’s criminal record. Further information on PNDs can be accessed at the [nidirect website](#).

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Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Data source and coverage

The statistics are produced using administrative data sourced from the Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism (DSM1). They were extracted primarily based on records contained on the Criminal Records Viewer (CRV), held on Causeway. CRV utilises data that originated in the PSNI, PPS and from Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. Causeway is an interconnected information system, launched as a joint undertaking by the Criminal Justice Organisations in Northern Ireland. The information is not a sample, but a complete dataset of all relevant cases recorded within the time period reported on. As part of the preparation of the figures for the bulletin, numerous validation checks are carried out by the NISRA statisticians responsible for production of the bulletin, to ensure the data are fit for purpose.

Full details of data relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, user need, cost and confidentiality is available in the accompanying background quality report. Details of the data quality checks and processes that DoJ has in place are available in the Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) document on the DoJ website.

These statistics are produced on a financial year basis, ie in relation to cases dealt with or completed from 1 April to 31 March each year. The data underpinning this report are sourced from those compiled in the production of an annual Prosecution, Convictions and Out of Court Disposals report, taking data on convictions and out of court diversionary disposals each year and merging it with a historical disposals file. As the Prosecutions bulletin is produced on a calendar year basis, the publication of first time entrants data is delayed until publication of prosecutions data for the entire period to be reported on has been completed. Further, this allows for efficient sequencing of work by the small team that prepare these statistics, as they are also responsible for producing statistics on Case Processing Time Statistics and Youth Engagement statistics in Northern Ireland.

Full details of data relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, strengths, weaknesses, user need, cost and confidentiality are available in the [accompanying background quality](#) report. Details of the data quality checks and processes that DoJ has in place are available in the [Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\)](#) document on the DoJ website. A summary of the strength and weaknesses of the data are included on the following page.

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Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Interpreting the data

Figures for first time entrants to the justice system in Northern Ireland, as reported in this bulletin, are based on those who have had a conviction at any time since 1960 and those who had either a conviction or a diversionary disposal since the implementation of the Causeway system DSM1 in December 2009. This means that the reported rate of first offences may be slightly higher than the actuality, as, in some cases, first offences would have been dealt with by means of diversionary disposal, information on which is not available prior to the introduction of DSM1. However, any likely impact of this statistical effect should lessen with the passing of time.

In this publication, first offences dealt with by conviction are distinct from those instances counted as a first conviction. This is because an individual receiving a first conviction may have previously been dealt with within the justice system by way of diversion. The following table compares first offences where a conviction has been imposed in 2020/21 with those cases of first convictions where diversions previously received have not been taken into consideration. The difference between the two rates is explained by the inclusion of diversions information for those cases where a diversion was an offender’s first true contact with the justice system.

First convictions and first offences dealt with by conviction 2021-22

First conviction	First offence dealt with by conviction	All convictions	First convictions as a percentage of all convictions	First offences as a percentage of all convictions
5,953	4,932	24,418	24.4%	20.2%

4 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Data strengths and limitations

Strengths

- Causeway is an integrated messaging system specifically designed to support information sharing between the five main NI Criminal Justice organisations. The information recorded within the individual organisations is used to manage day to day business and to communicate between the other organisations so needs to be highly accurate.
- The system works well and is trusted by the staff who use it. It is reliable and needs minimal maintenance.
- A number of key personnel are involved in managing Causeway and have developed a high level of competence and experience of the system.
- The data are sourced from an administrative data system and therefore are a complete record of all cases (i.e. are not based on a sample of staff).
- Processes and systems have been developed and refined over the years to address any quality concerns that emerged and the statisticians have developed a complex and detailed series of validation checks which are applied to the data to ensure any anomalies are corrected.

Limitations

- The system depends on staff within five separate Criminal Justice organisations inputting details and updating records on their own systems. While there is the potential for problems to occur if details aren't updated on a timely basis or if input errors occur, the nature of the information make accuracy critical.