



Police Service
of Northern Ireland



Preliminary Breath Tests conducted in Northern Ireland, 2021

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- Between 2020 and 2021, the number of preliminary breath tests (PBTs) carried out by the PSNI increased by 16%, from 28,971 to 33,482. The increase should be viewed in light of the lower than average levels reported since the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, due to reduced [traffic volumes](#) coupled with selective testing to minimise risk to both the public and police officers.
- The proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs in 2021 was 10.5%, which was slightly lower than in 2020 (11.8%).
- The highest proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs was recorded on a Sunday.
- The highest proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs was recorded between 3:00am and 6:00am (25%).

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1. Things you need to know about this release

Under the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1995 amended by the Road Traffic Order 2007 police can require a Preliminary Breath Test (PBT) from any person driving or attempting to drive on a road or in charge of a motor vehicle on a road OR other public place, who is:

- involved in a Road Traffic Collision (RTC) OR
- suspected of committing a moving traffic offence (no matter how minor) OR
- suspected of having alcohol or a drug in their body or is under the influence of a drug

The PBT can also be administered where police have reasonable cause to suspect the person was previously driving in any of the above scenarios. Where an injury RTC has occurred, police have a power to enter any premises for the purpose of obtaining a PBT or to arrest someone who has "refused to provide" or failed a PBT.

It is an offence to refuse to take a breath test when required to do so by a police officer unless there is a reasonable excuse. Court penalties for refusing an evidential test are the same as being above the legal limit.

In addition the Road Traffic (Amendment) (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 1) Order (NI) 2016 provides police the power to establish a check point and to require the person in charge of a vehicle to provide a breath test. This new legislation came into force from 25th November 2016.

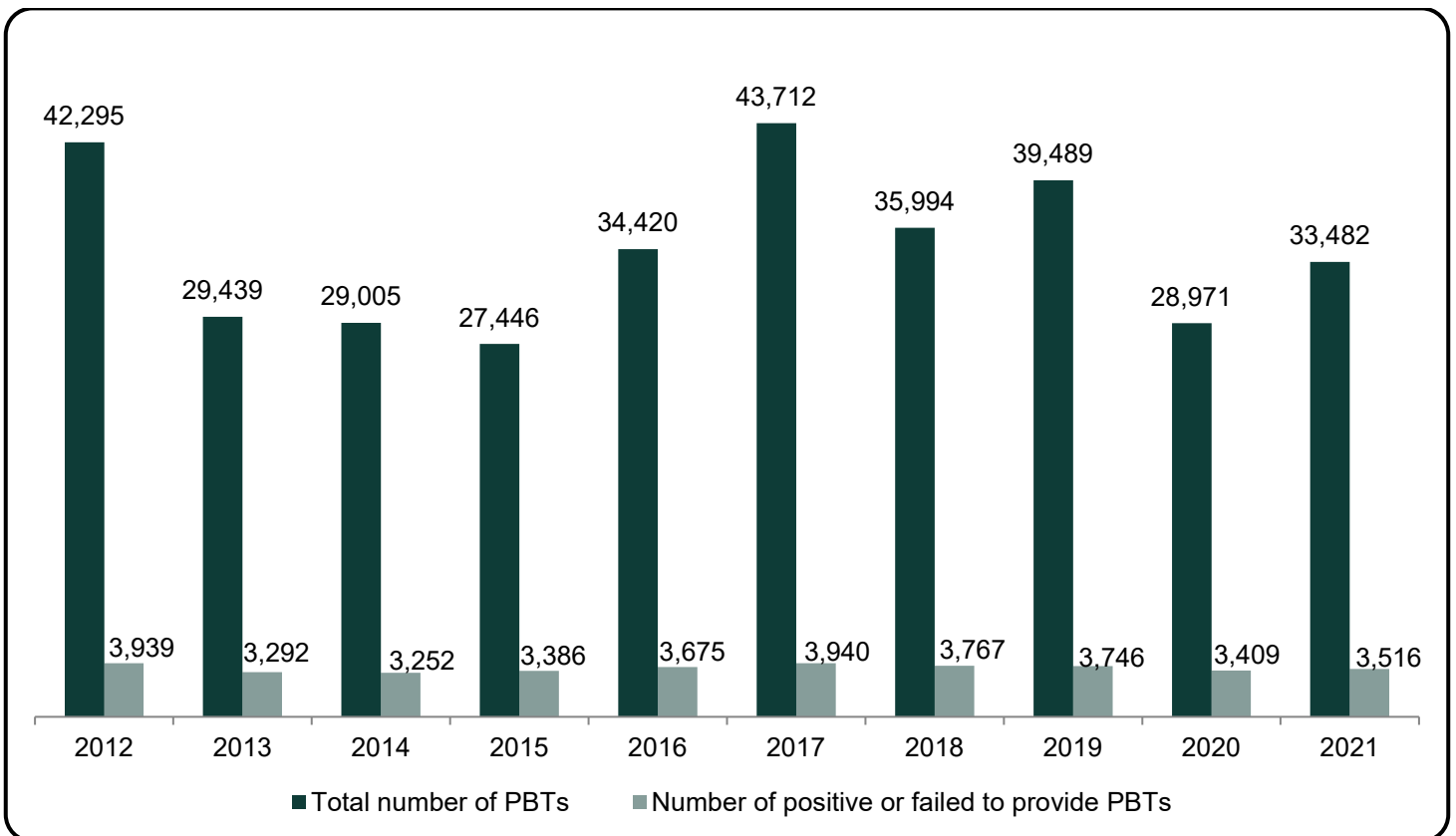
Results of PBTs can only be regarded as indicative of the level of alcohol present in a sample of breath and are not used to determine whether a driver was above or below the legal limit to drive. It remains the case that it is only at a police station or hospital that a specimen(s) can be obtained to determine the proportion of alcohol in a person's measured specimen of breath, blood or urine using pre-calibrated evidential devices. This ensures the sample has not been affected by any interfering substances. In some cases it becomes necessary to take further specimens of blood or urine for subsequent laboratory analysis. These subsequent evidential tests are not included in the preliminary breath test statistics.

Since April 2009, the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has been using Lion500b devices to conduct a PBT. In 2021, Roads Policing officers were provided with updated Lion 700 devices. The devices are able to record accurate breath alcohol readings and the result (Pass, Fail or Warn) of individual tests, as well as the reason for the test, date and time of test and profiles of those tested. Officers are responsible for downloading the data on a regular basis. Prior to this the service relied on manual returns for recording when a PBT was carried out. Statistics are not available prior to April 2009.

2. Trends

- The number of PBTs carried out by the PSNI has fluctuated throughout the ten year period between 2012 and 2021, with a low of 27,446 recorded in 2015 and a high of 43,712 in 2017.
- Between 2020 and 2021, the number of PBTs carried out by the PSNI increased by 16%, from 28,971 to 33,482. The increase should be viewed in light of the lower than average levels from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, due to reduced [traffic volumes](#) coupled with selective testing to minimise risk to both the public and police officers.
- The proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs in 2021 was 10.5%, which was slightly lower than in 2020 (11.8%).

Figure 1 Number of PBTs conducted, 2012 – 2021



3. Preliminary Breath Tests by result

- Over four fifths (85%) of all PBTs conducted in 2021 showed that the driver had no alcohol consumed, which was a similar proportion to previous years. Over one in ten (10.5%) of all PBTs conducted in 2021 resulted in a positive result or a person failing to provide.

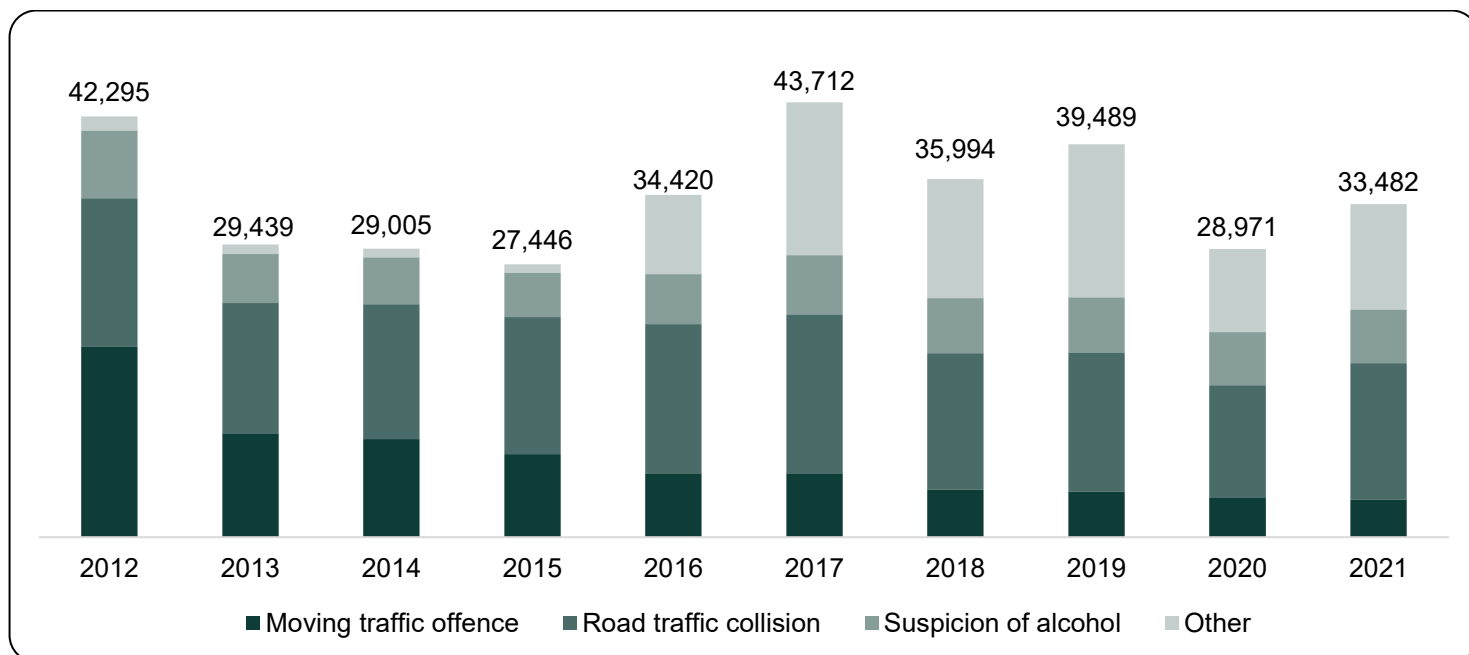
Table 1 Number of preliminary breath tests by result, 2012 – 2021

Year	Zero	Pass	Warning	Fail	Failed to Provide	Total
2012	36,391	1,692	273	3,292	647	42,295
2013	24,645	1,326	176	2,875	417	29,439
2014	24,167	1,365	221	2,810	442	29,005
2015	22,562	1,302	196	2,836	550	27,446
2016	29,085	1,455	205	2,971	704	34,420
2017	37,812	1,754	206	3,216	724	43,712
2018	30,511	1,509	207	3,102	665	35,994
2019	33,982	1,559	202	3,031	715	39,489
2020	24,159	1,217	186	2,829	580	28,971
2021	28,391	1,395	180	2,911	605	33,482

4. Preliminary Breath Tests by reason

- Road traffic collisions accounted for just over two fifths (41%) of why PBTs were conducted in 2021, followed by the 'other' category accounting for a further 32%. The marked increase in this category in recent years is due to the introduction of the new legislation on 25th November 2016, allowing police to establish a check point and to require the person in charge of a vehicle to provide a breath test.

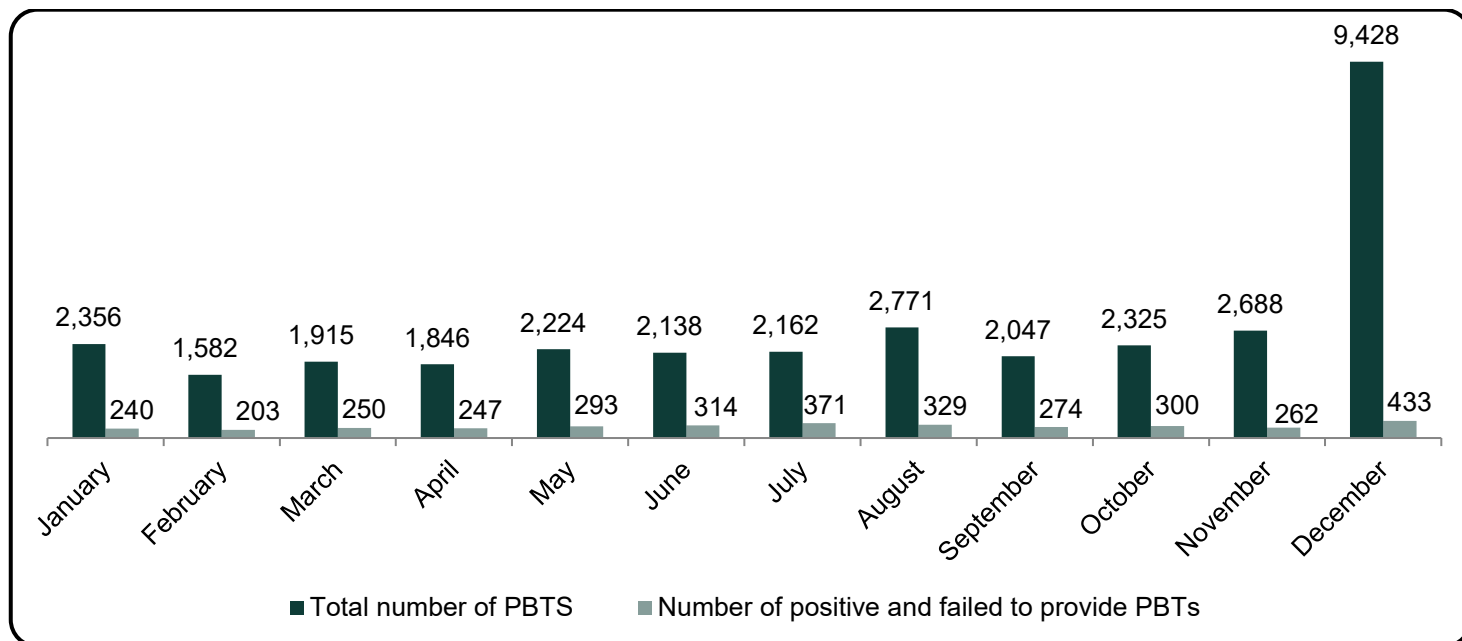
Figure 2 Number of preliminary breath tests by reason for test, 2012 – 2021



5. Preliminary Breath Tests by month of year

- During 2021, over one quarter (28%) of PBTs were conducted in December. This was due to the Christmas drink / drug drive campaign which ran from 1st December 2021 to 1st January 2022.

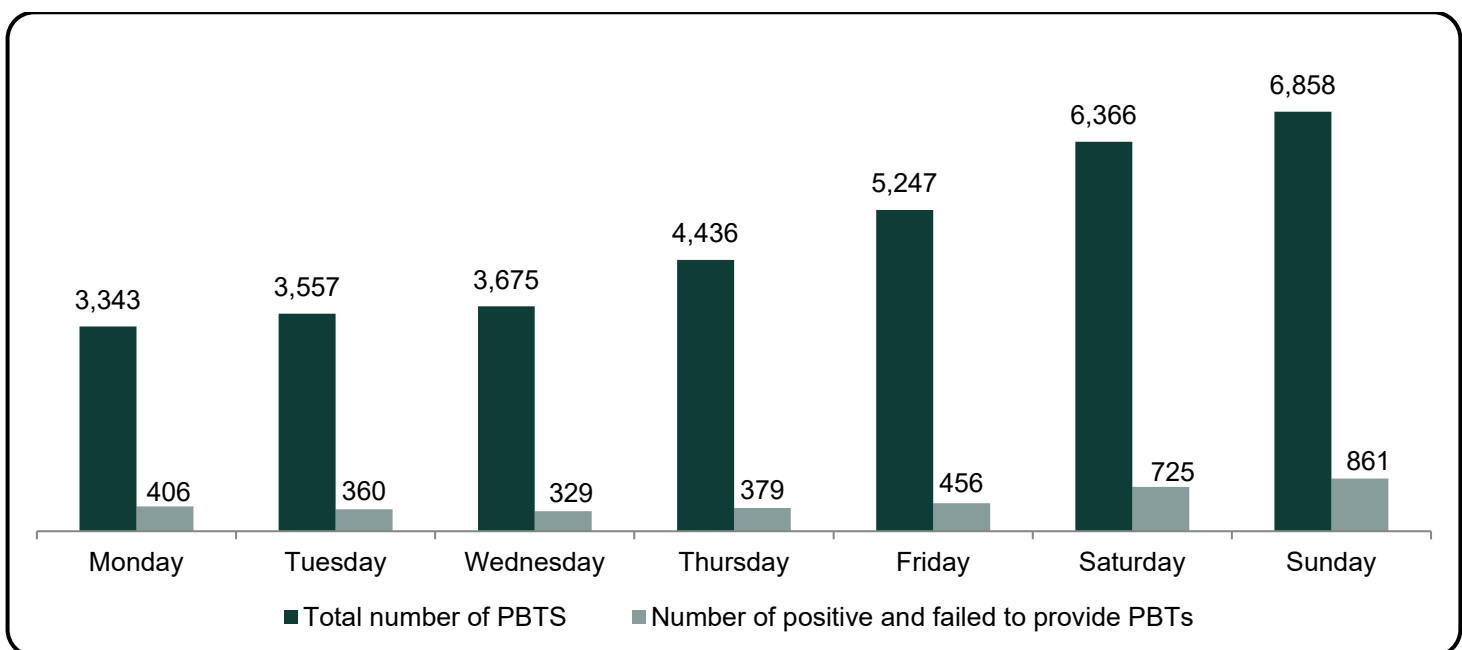
Figure 3 Number of PBTs by month, 2021



6. Preliminary Breath Tests by day of week

- The highest proportion of the PBTs undertaken in 2021 were carried out on a Sunday (20%).
- The highest proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs was recorded on a Sunday.

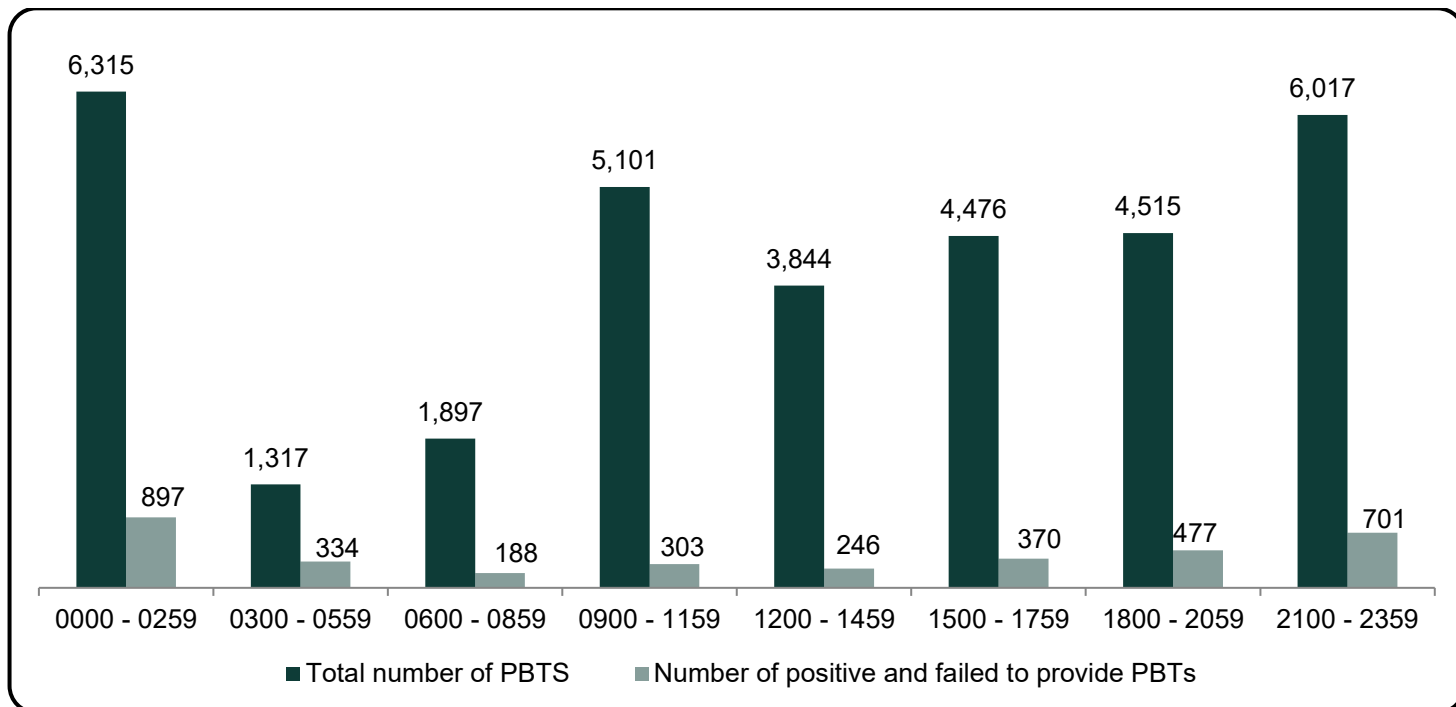
Figure 4 Number of PBTs by day of week, 2021



7. Preliminary Breath Tests by time of day

- In 2021, the largest proportion of PBTs was conducted between midnight and 3am.
- The highest proportion of positive or failed to provide PBTs was recorded between 3:00am and 6:00am.

Figure 5 Number of PBTs by time of day, 2021



8. Comparisons

- The most recent data available for England and Wales relates to 2020 and shows that there were 5 PBTs per 1,000 population and 8 PBTs per 1,000 population respectively¹. The corresponding figure for Northern Ireland for 2020 was 15 PBTs per 1,000 population, increasing to 18 PBTs conducted per 1,000 population in 2021².
- In 2020, 17% of all PBTs in England and Wales were positive or failed to provide. This compares with 12% in Northern Ireland in the same year.

¹ Excludes the Metropolitan Police who were unable to supply complete data.

² NI rates per population are based on the latest mid-year estimates of population published by NISRA - <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/2020-mid-year-population-estimates-northern-ireland>