



Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

Update to 31st December 2021

Date of Publication:

27 January 2022

Frequency of Publication:

Quarterly

Issued by:

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The number of drug seizure incidents and drug-related arrests recorded by the police showed a mainly upwards trend between 2006/07 and 2020/21. Figures for the latest 12 months show an increase in drug seizure incidents and a fall in drug-related arrests.

In 12 months from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021:

- There were 8,778 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 567 (6.9 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- There were higher numbers of Class A, Class B and Class C drug seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A) and benzodiazepines (Class C).
- Six policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,199 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 213 (6.2 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months.
- Nine policing districts showed a decrease in drug-related arrests, with Causeway Coast and Glens showing the largest fall.

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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 release is produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics.

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 2021. Figures were compiled on 20 January 2022; as of that date 96.7% of seizure incidents for April 2021 to December 2021 have been fully validated; 3.3% 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 2021, particularly for the most recent quarter October to December. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, 165KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 31 March 2022 will be published in April/May 2022. The PSNI website has a full [publication schedule, 32KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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 PDF \(333KB\) \(opens in a new window\)](#) 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 PDF \(333KB\) \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Geographic breakdown: Seizure incidents and arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for around 29 percent of all drug seizure incidents and up to 39 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 2020/21 (8,428 seizure incidents) is more than three times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590 seizure incidents).

Figure 1 Trends in drug seizure incidents since 2006/07

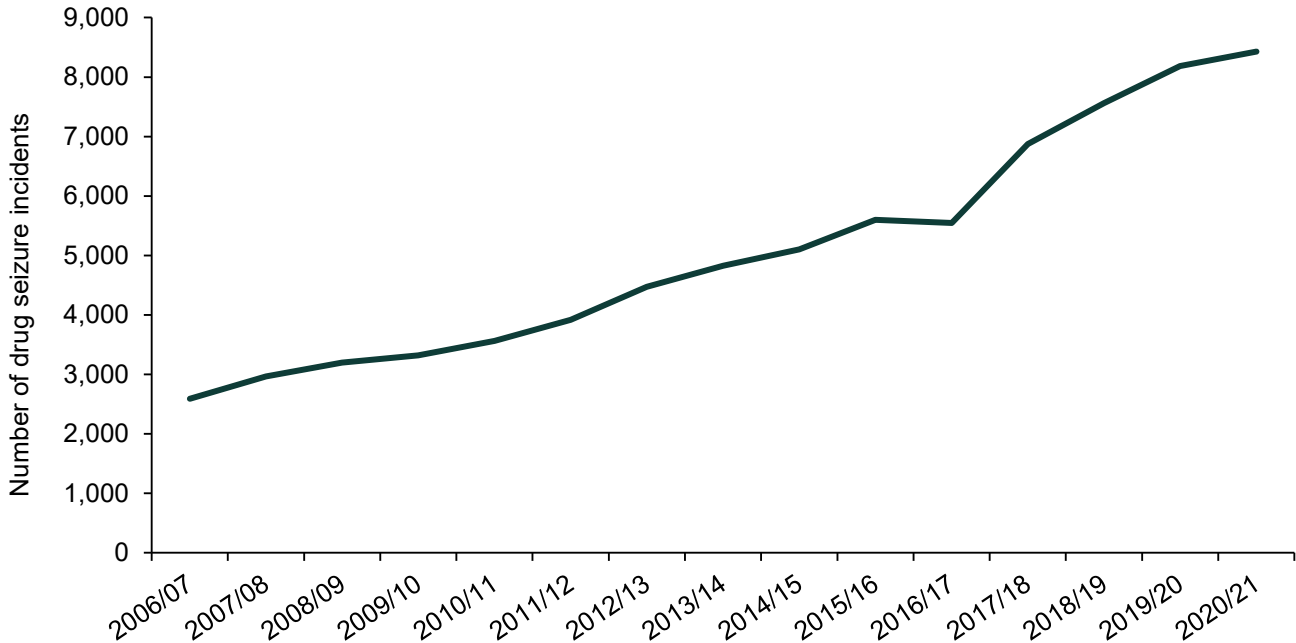
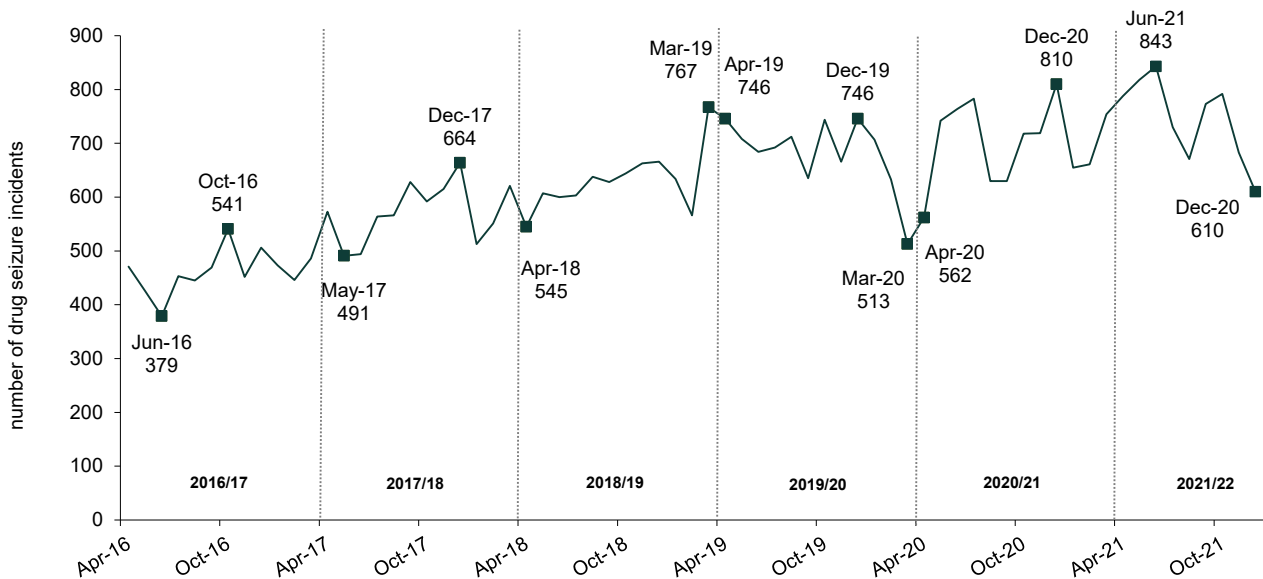


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2016. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures since this date. For further information please refer to section 3 of this bulletin.

Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2016 to December 2021, 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 2021 to 31st December 2021:

- There were 8,778 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 567 (6.9 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 8,211 were recorded.
- There were higher numbers of Class A, Class B and Class C seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A) and benzodiazepines (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.
- 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 seizure incidents since recorded, particularly the lower levels seen in March 2020 and April 2020. The trend in drug seizure incidents since the lockdown measures were introduced 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 for December 2021, 0.5MB \(opens in new window\)](#). 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 2021, particularly for the most recent quarter October to December.

Details of the quantities of each drug type seized are available in Tables 4 and 5 of the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, 165KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Figure 3 Drug seizure incidents January 2020 to December 2021

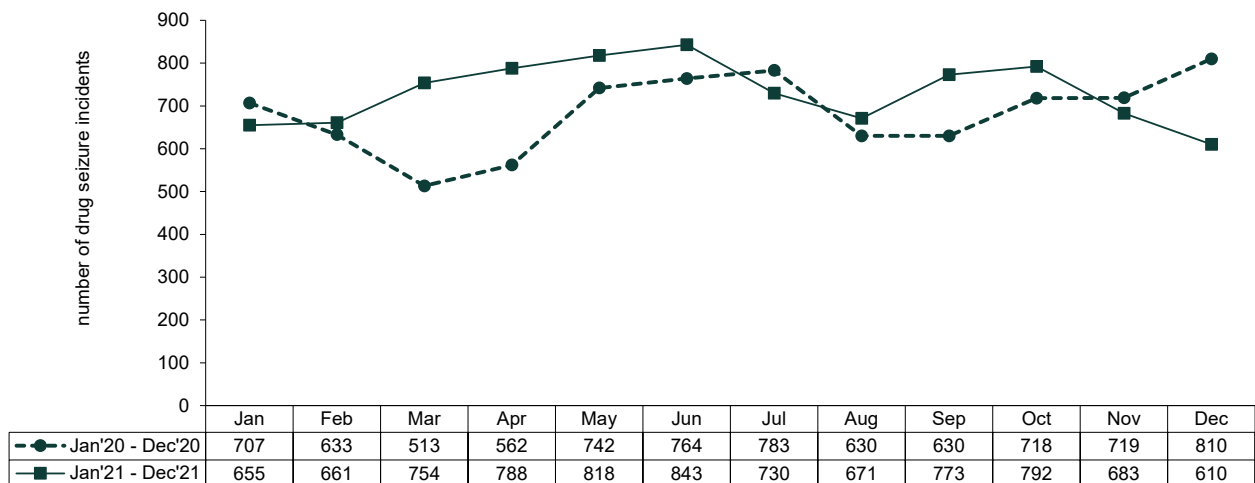


Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to December 2021 compared with the previous 12 months

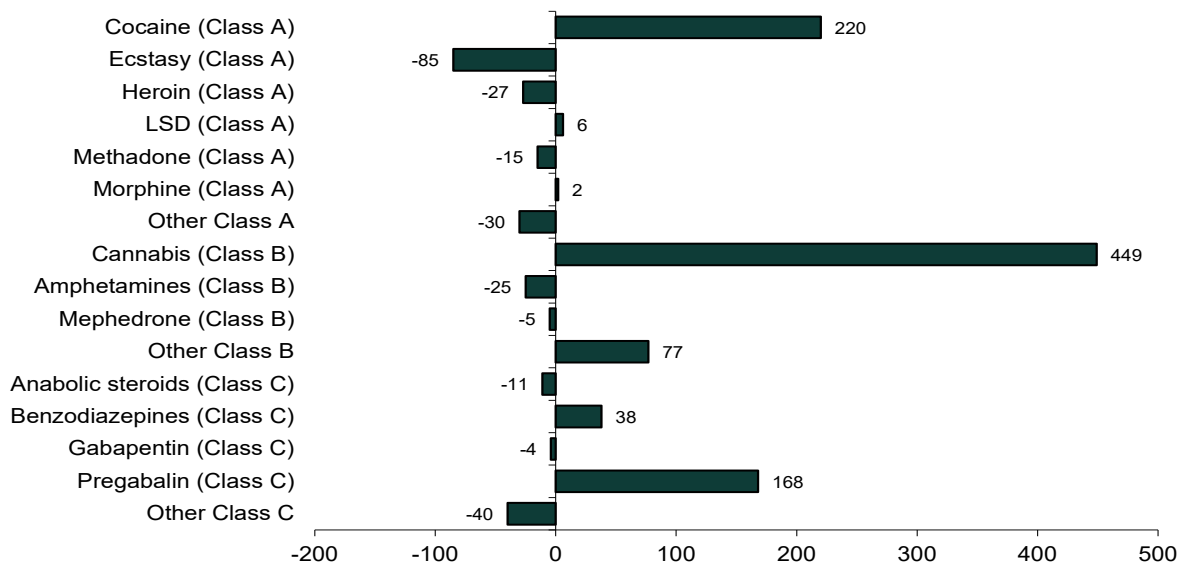


Table 1 Number of drug seizures¹ by class and drug type

Drug class ²	Drug type ²	Drug seizure incidents Jan'20-Dec'20	Drug seizure incidents Jan'21-Dec'21 ³	change
Class A	Cocaine	1,076	1,296	220
	Ecstasy	191	106	-85
	Heroin	173	146	-27
	LSD	18	24	6
	Methadone	22	7	-15
	Morphine	16	18	2
	Other Class A ⁴	111	81	-30
	All Class A	1,519	1,613	94
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	<i>5,135</i>	<i>5,607</i>	<i>472</i>
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	<i>153</i>	<i>140</i>	<i>-13</i>
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	<i>128</i>	<i>104</i>	<i>-24</i>
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	<i>682</i>	<i>705</i>	<i>23</i>
	Total cannabis	5,705	6,154	449
	Amphetamines	132	107	-25
	Mephedrone	8	3	-5
	Other Class B ⁵	116	193	77
	All Class B	5,863	6,324	461
Class C	Anabolic steroids	47	36	-11
	Benzodiazepines	1,255	1,293	38
	Gabapentin	50	46	-4
	Pregabalin	617	785	168
	Other Class C ⁶	241	201	-40
	All Class C	1,875	1,983	108
All drugs		8,211	8,778	567

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 2021 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2021 to March 2022 will be published in September 2022.

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 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, six policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents. [Table 2 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, 165KB \(opens in a new window\)](#)]

Figure 5 Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to December 2021 compared with the previous 12 months

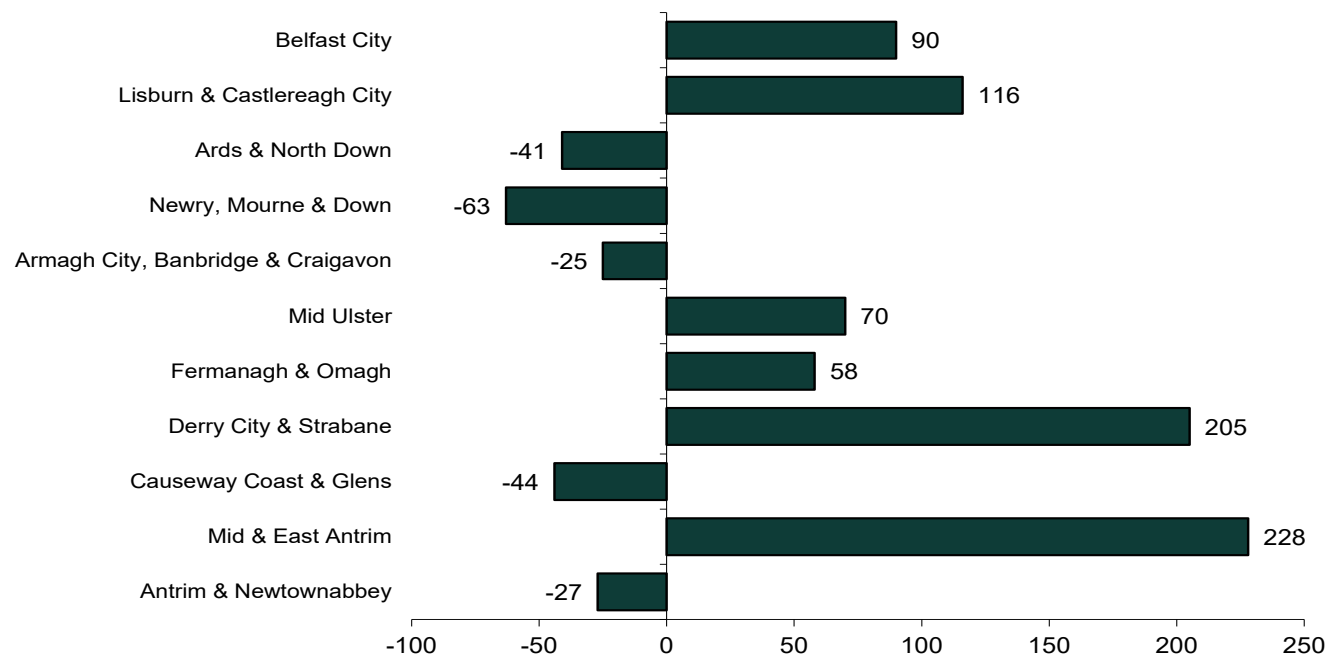


Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district ¹	Drug seizure incidents	Drug seizure incidents	change
	Jan'20-Dec'20	Jan'21-Dec'21 ²	
Belfast City	2,482	2,572	90
<i>East</i>	432	410	-22
<i>North</i>	727	698	-29
<i>South</i>	875	965	90
<i>West</i>	448	499	51
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	617	733	116
Ards & North Down	348	307	-41
Newry, Mourne & Down	705	642	-63
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	809	784	-25
Mid Ulster	470	540	70
Fermanagh & Omagh	305	363	58
Derry City & Strabane	739	944	205
Causeway Coast & Glens	538	494	-44
Mid & East Antrim	718	946	228
Antrim & Newtownabbey	480	453	-27
Northern Ireland	8,211	8,778	567

¹ Seizure incidents are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for approximately 29 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 2021 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2021 to March 2022 will be published in September 2022.

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.

The number of arrests for drug offences has increased in most of the years since 2006/07, with falls experienced in 2014/15 (1.3 per cent), 2016/17 (8.2 per cent) and 2020/21 (13.2 per cent). The level recorded in 2020/21 (3,325) is nearly twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

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

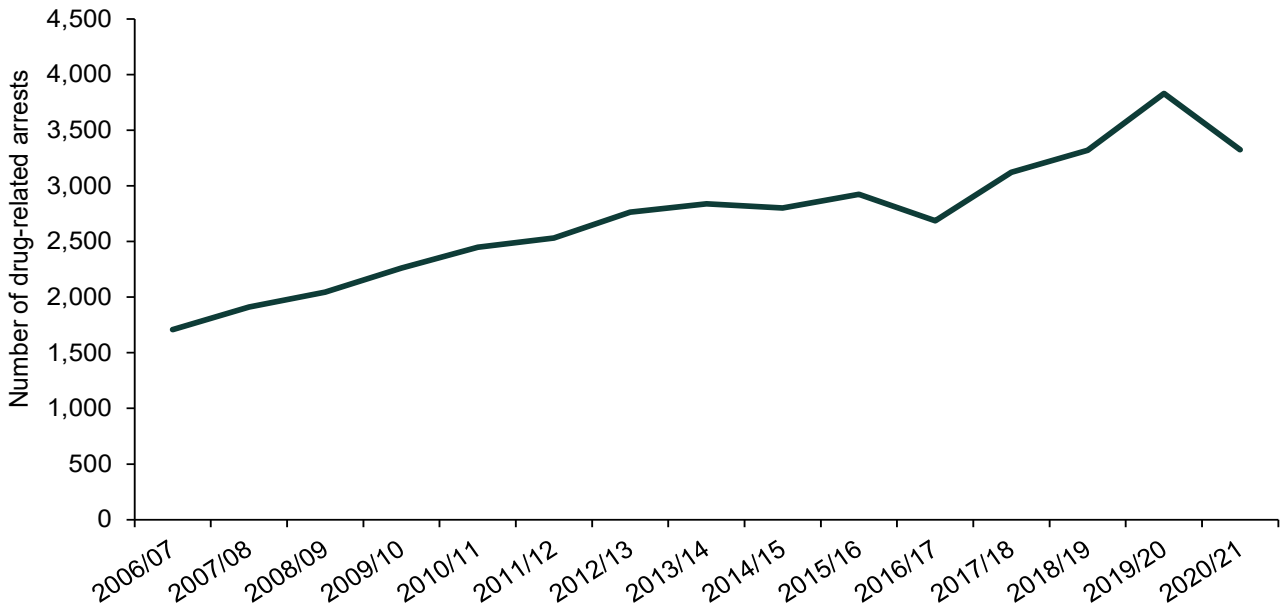
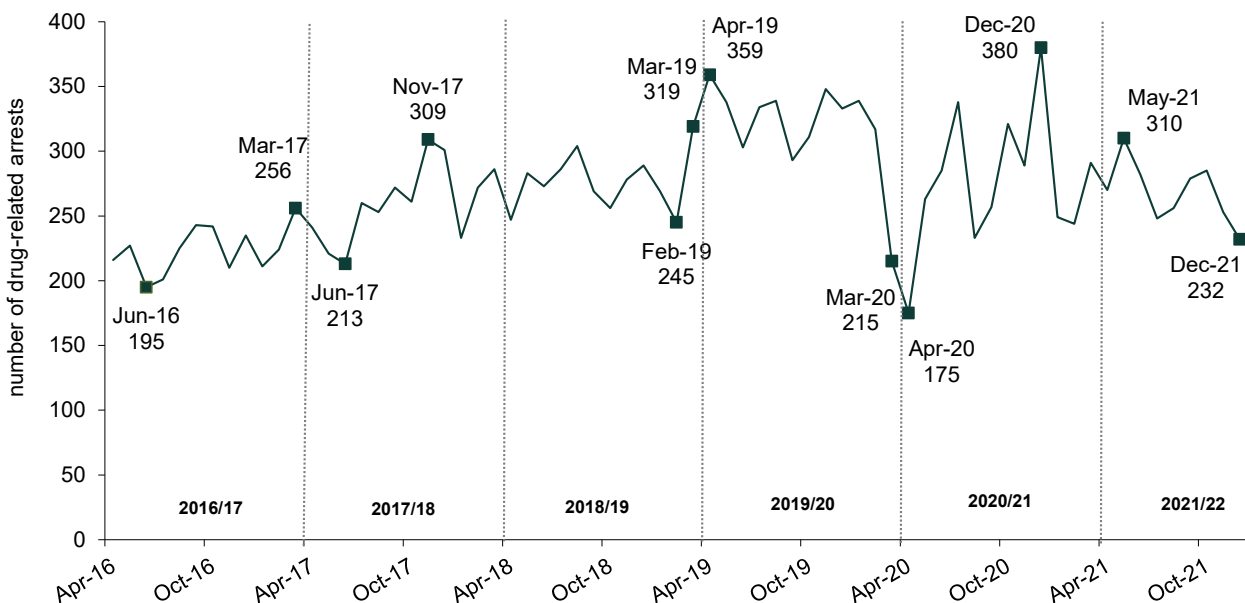


Figure 7 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2016. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests since this date. For further information please refer to section 6 of this bulletin.

Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2016 to December 2021, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



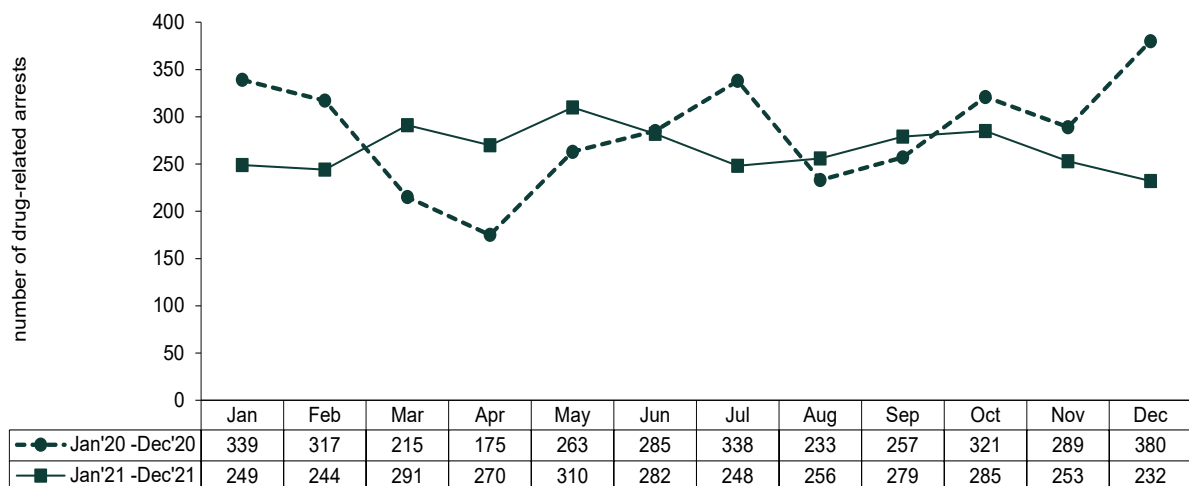
More detailed information on drug seizure trends is available in the [Annual Trends report \(opens in a new window\)](#) on the PSNI website.

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

In the 12 months from 1st January 2021 to 31st December 2021:

- There were 3,199 drug-related arrests, a decrease of 213 (6.2 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, 165KB \(opens in a new window\)](#)].
- The fall in the number of drug-related arrests in March 2020 and April 2020 may be related to the Covid-19 lockdown measures that were introduced on 23rd March 2020. A further drop in drug-related arrests for January 2020 and February 2020 may also have been impacted by the lockdown measures which were put in place on 26th December 2020. The overall trend in the number of drug-related arrests recorded since the lockdown measures were first introduced is broadly similar to that seen for both drug seizure incidents (Section 3 of this bulletin) and 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 for December 2021, 0.5MB \(opens in new window\)](#).
- There were 380 drug-related arrests in December 2020 which is the highest monthly figure recorded.
- The largest falls in drug arrests between January 2021 and December 2021 when compared with previous 12 months were seen in January, February, July and December which were lower by 90, 73, 90 and 148 respectively.
- Drug-related arrests were higher in five of the months during 2021 when compared with the previous 12 month period, with March and April showing the highest increases of 76 and 95 respectively.

Figure 8 Drug-related arrests January 2020 to December 2021



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

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, nine policing districts showed a decrease in drug-related arrests. Causeway Coast and Glens showed the largest decrease. Belfast City accounted for nearly two fifths of all drug-related arrests during the latest 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, 165KB \(opens in a new window\)](#)]

Figure 9 Change in drug-related arrests by policing district, 12 months to December 2021 compared with the previous 12 months

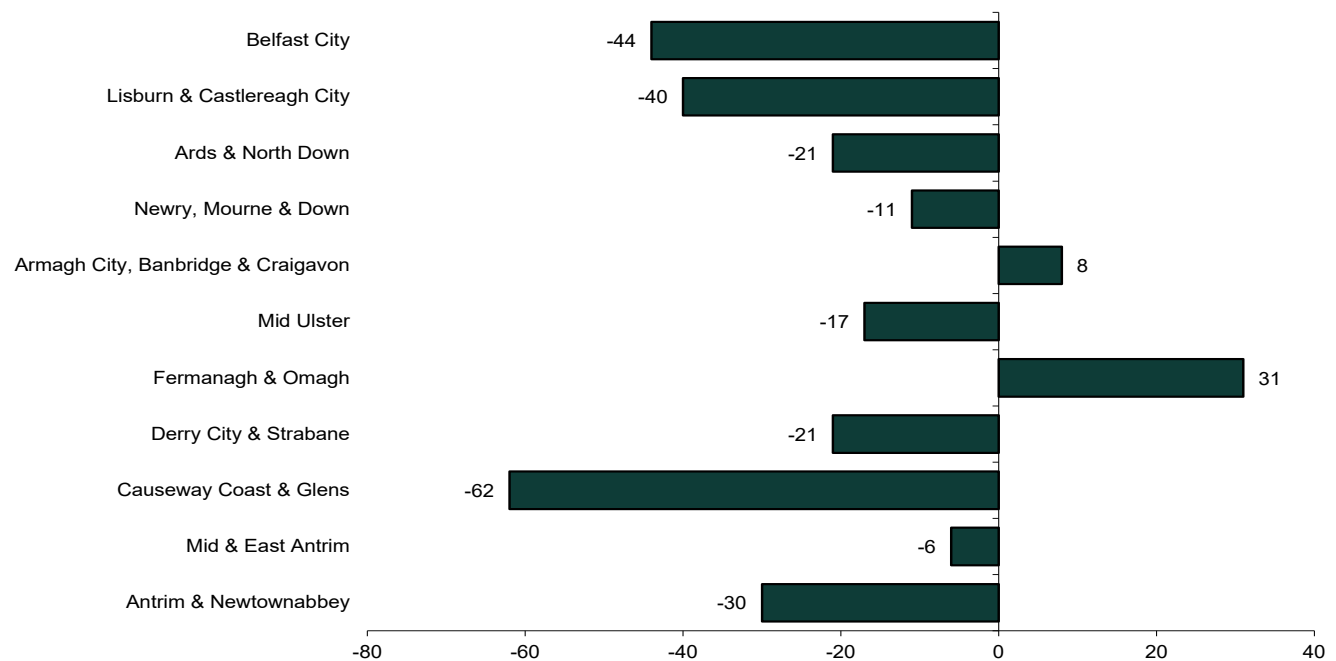


Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district

Policing district ¹	Drug-related arrests Jan'20-Dec'20	Drug-related arrests Jan'21-Dec'21 ²	change
Belfast City	1,283	1,239	-44
<i>East</i>	177	191	14
<i>North</i>	357	345	-12
<i>South</i>	514	508	-6
<i>West</i>	235	195	-40
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	239	199	-40
Ards & North Down	133	112	-21
Newry, Mourne & Down	213	202	-11
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	252	260	8
Mid Ulster	145	128	-17
Fermanagh & Omagh	98	129	31
Derry City & Strabane	452	431	-21
Causeway Coast & Glens	221	159	-62
Mid & East Antrim	190	184	-6
Antrim & Newtownabbey	186	156	-30
Northern Ireland	3,412	3,199	-213

¹ Drug-related arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for around 39 per cent of all 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).

² Changes can be expected to figures from 1st April 2020 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2021 to March 2022 will be published in September 2022.

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 PDF \(333KB\) \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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

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

Publication

The PSNI website has a full [publication schedule, 32KB \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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

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 \(opens in a new window\)](#).