

Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

Update to 31 March 2020

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The number of drug seizure incidents and drug-related arrests recorded by the police have shown an upwards trend since 2006/07. Figures for the latest 12 months confirm that this upwards trend is continuing.

In 12 months from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020:

- There were 8,177 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 616 (8.1 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- Higher levels of seizure incidents were seen across Class B and Class C drugs, with a slight fall in Class A.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by benzodiazepines (Class C) and cocaine (Class A).
- All but two policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,819 drug-related arrests, an increase of 501 (15.1 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months.
- Nine policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests, with Belfast City showing the largest increase.



Northern Ireland
Statistics and Research Agency

Keeping People Safe



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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 March 2020. Figures were compiled on 12th June 2020; as of that date 98% of seizure incidents for April to March 2020 have been fully validated; 2% are fully/partly outstanding or are still awaiting FSNI confirmation. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

The annual trends bulletin including finalised figures for the 12 months to 31 March 2020 will be published in September 2020. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the PSNI website.

Drug Seizure Incidents

Statistics in this publication relate to incidents in which a drug controlled under the [Misuse of Drugs Act \(1971\)](#) (MDA) is seized, recovered or found by police. This includes drugs intercepted in the post and drugs which are handed in to the police.

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.

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 [User Guide](#) which accompanies this publication, and may be considered alongside this publication to obtain a more comprehensive overview of the drug situation in Northern Ireland.
- Pregabalin and Gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019 and have been included in the drug seizure statistics from this date.

Points to note

Border Force seizures: Drugs seized by the Border Force are published quarterly by the Home Office as [Border Force transparency data](#), with Border Force seizures in each of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland presented separately. Border Force 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 [User Guide](#).

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 approximately one third of all drug seizure incidents and around 40 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 2019/20 (8,177 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

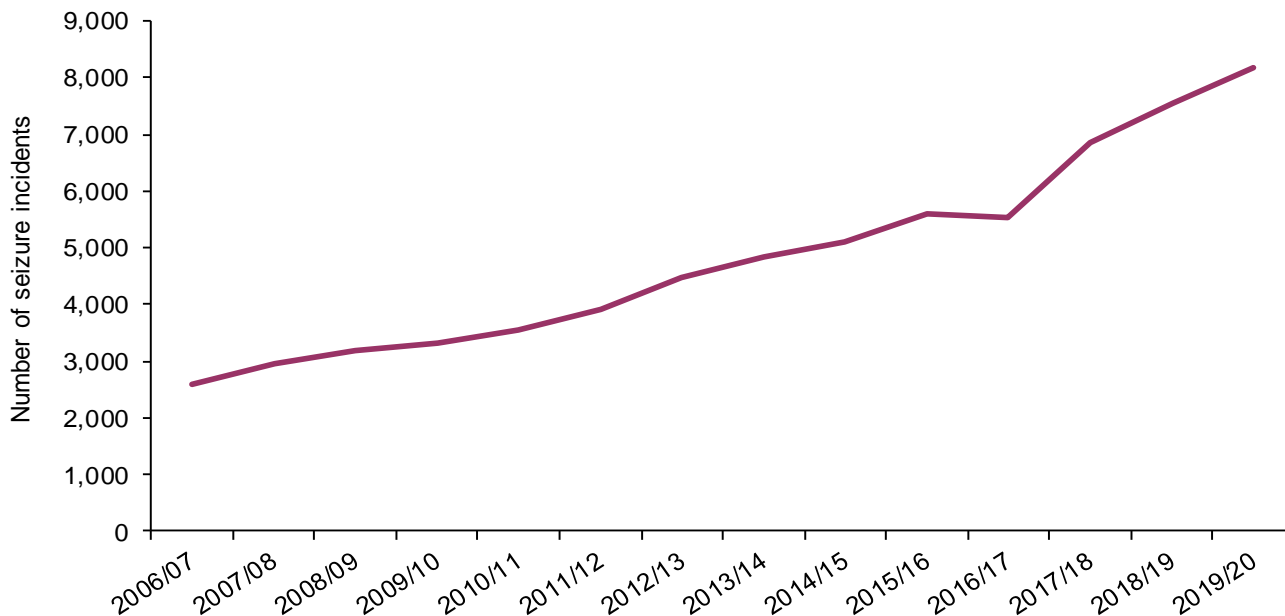
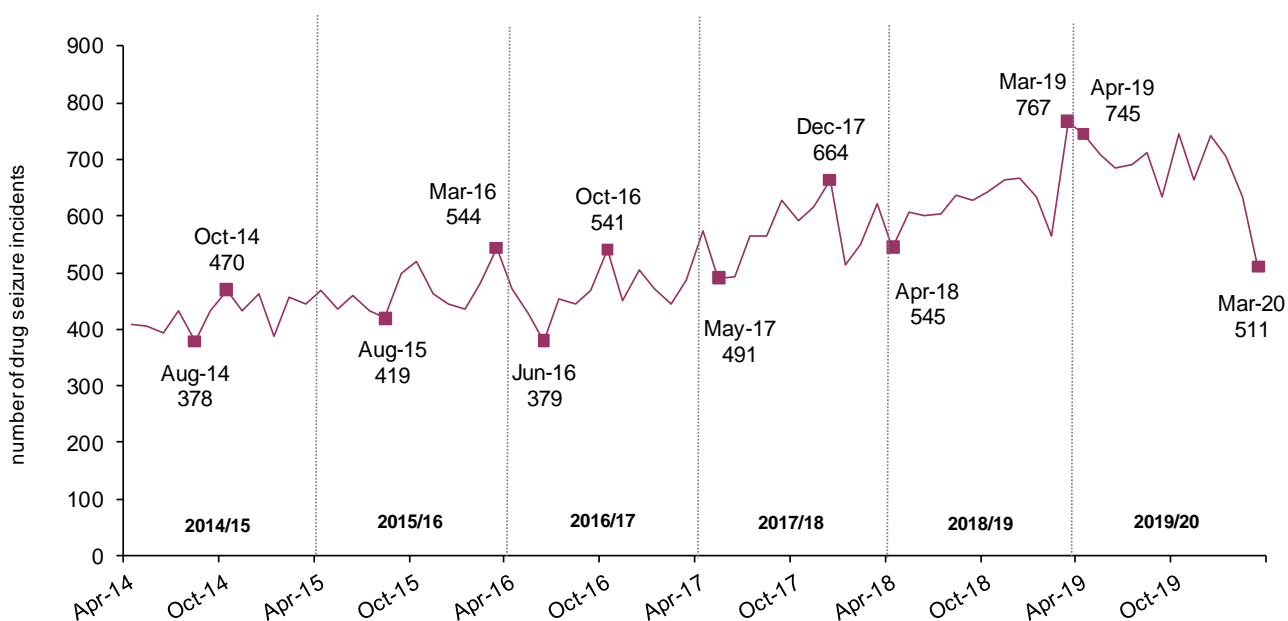


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2014. The impact of Covid-19 should be taken into account when considering the lower level of seizure incidents seen in March 2020.

Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2015 to March 2020, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



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

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

In the 12 months from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020:

- There were 8,177 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 616 (8.1 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 7,561 seizure incidents were recorded.
- The number of drug seizure incidents has been higher in each month since April 2019 when compared with the same month the previous year, with the exception of March 2020 which was 256 lower than March 2019 and 122 lower than February 2020. The impact of Covid-19 should be taken into account when considering the lower level seen in March 2020.
- Higher levels of seizure incidents were seen across Class B and Class C drugs. Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by benzodiazepines (Class C) and cocaine (Class A). 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.
- Pregabalin and Gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019 and, from this date, they have been included in the drug seizure statistics within 'Other Class C'. Between April 2019 and March 2020 there were 724 seizure incidents involving Pregabalin and 59 involving Gabapentin. Together, these account for around one in ten drug seizure incidents and for more than 80 per cent of Other Class C drug seizure incidents recorded during 2019/20.

Details of the quantities of each drug type seized are available in Tables 4 and 5 of the accompanying [spreadsheet](#).

Figure 3 Drug seizure incidents April 2018 to March 2020

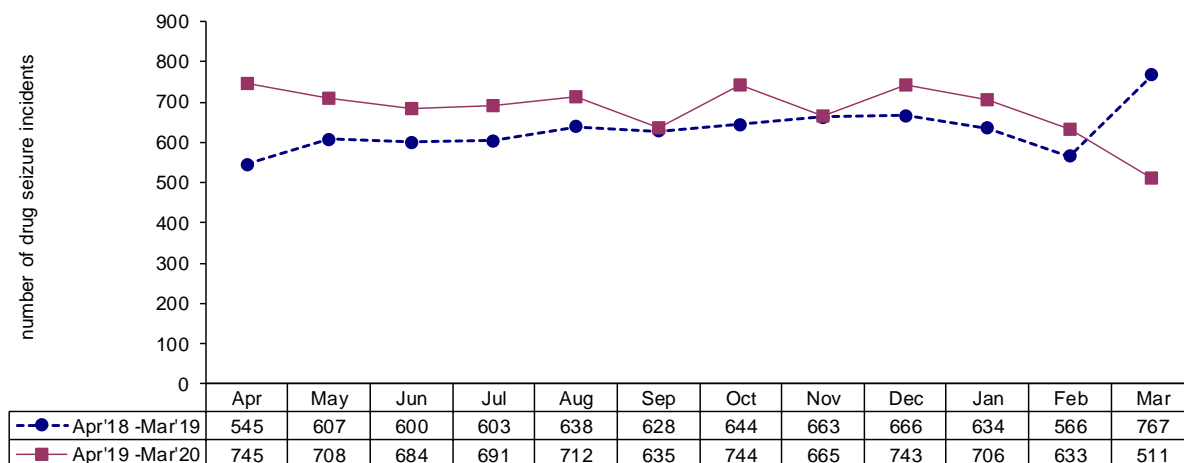


Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to March 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

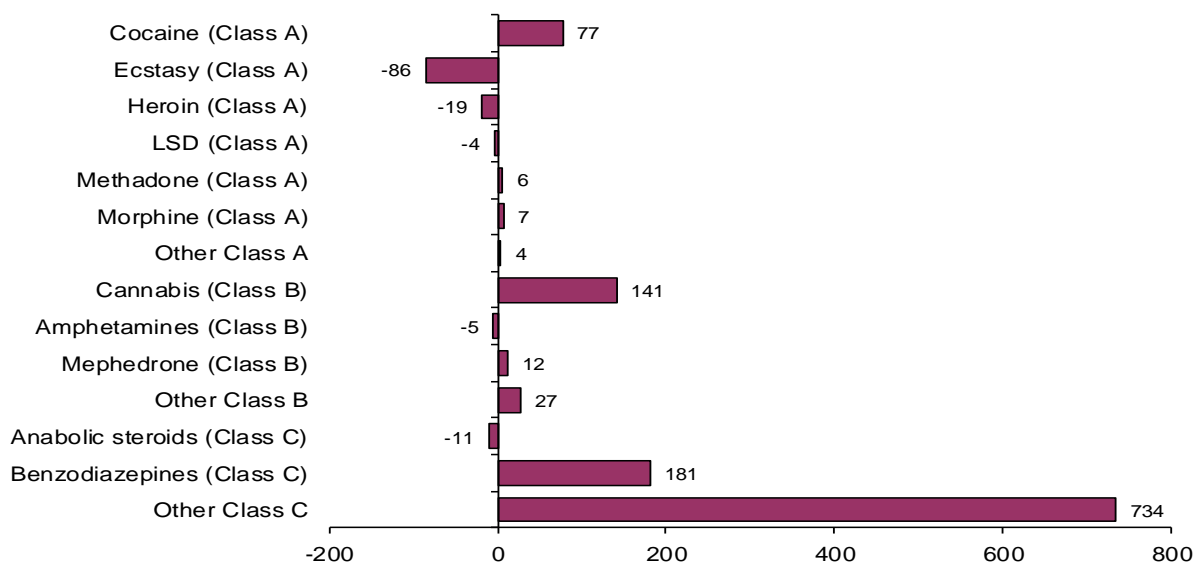


Table 1 Number of drug seizures¹ by class and drug type

Drug class ²	Drug type ²	Numbers		
		Drug seizure incidents		change
		Apr'18-Mar'19	Apr'19-Mar'20 ^{3,7}	
Class A	Cocaine	1,031	1,108	77
	Ecstasy	315	229	-86
	Heroin	259	240	-19
	LSD	20	16	-4
	Methadone	5	11	6
	Morphine	9	16	7
	Other Class A ⁴	106	110	4
	All Class A	1,660	1,648	-12
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	4,552	4,815	263
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	735	507	-228
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	116	94	-22
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	537	671	134
	Total cannabis	5,495	5,636	141
	Amphetamines	92	87	-5
	Mephedrone	2	14	12
	Other Class B ⁵	91	118	27
	All Class B	5,627	5,778	151
	Class C	Anabolic steroids	44	33
Benzodiazepines		1,016	1,197	181
Other Class C ^{6,7}		185	919	734
All Class C		1,178	1,868	690
All drugs	7,561	8,177	616	

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 in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2019 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2020.

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).

⁷ Other Class C drugs also include Pregabalin and Gabapentin which were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

4. Drug seizures - what has been happening in policing districts?

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, all but two policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents [Table 2 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#)]. Belfast City policing district, which accounts for nearly one in three drug seizure incidents, saw an increase of 192 (7.9 per cent). Mid & East Antrim policing district saw the largest increase (198 seizure incidents, 42.5 per cent).

Figure 5 Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to March 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

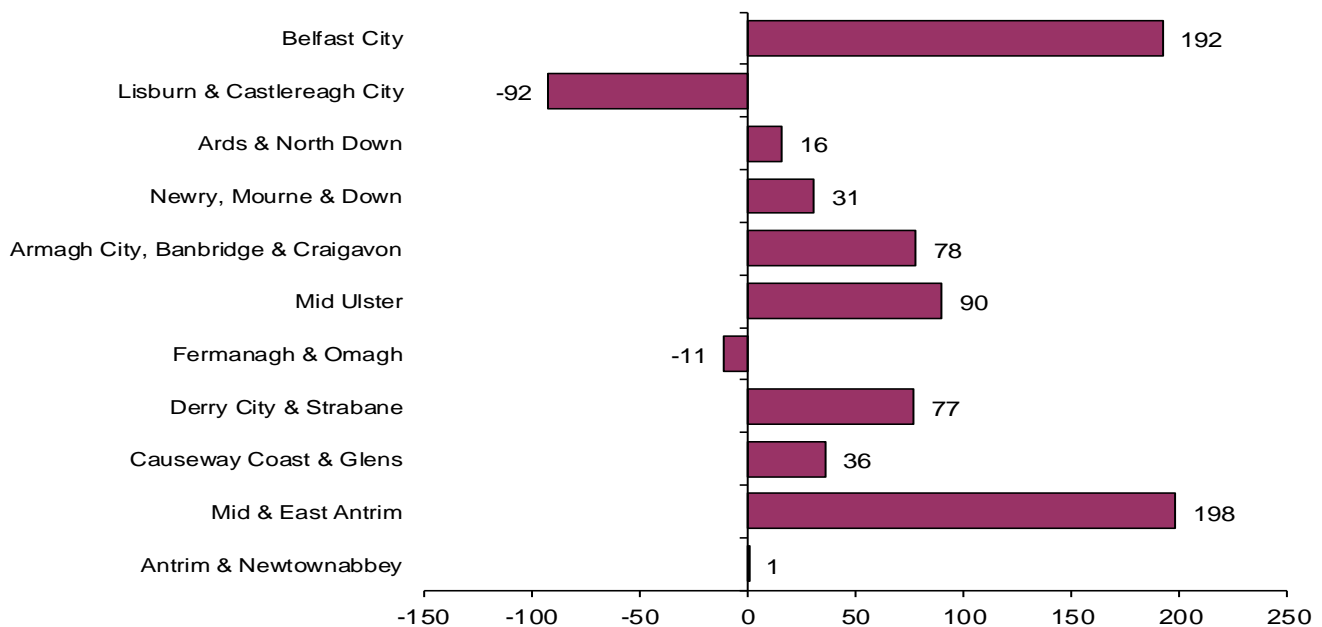


Table 2 Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district ¹	Numbers		
	Drug seizure incidents		change
	Apr'18-Mar'19	Apr'19-Mar'20 ²	
Belfast City	2,444	2,636	192
<i>East</i>	387	410	23
<i>North</i>	696	688	-8
<i>South</i>	963	1,114	151
<i>West</i>	398	424	26
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	694	602	-92
Ards & North Down	391	407	16
Newry, Mourne & Down	586	617	31
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	721	799	78
Mid Ulster	403	493	90
Fermanagh & Omagh	333	322	-11
Derry City & Strabane	593	670	77
Causeway Coast & Glens	454	490	36
Mid & East Antrim	466	664	198
Antrim & Newtownabbey	476	477	1
Northern Ireland	7,561	8,177	616

¹ Seizure incidents are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for approximately one third 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 in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2019 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2020.

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. The level recorded in 2019/20 (3,819) is more than twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

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

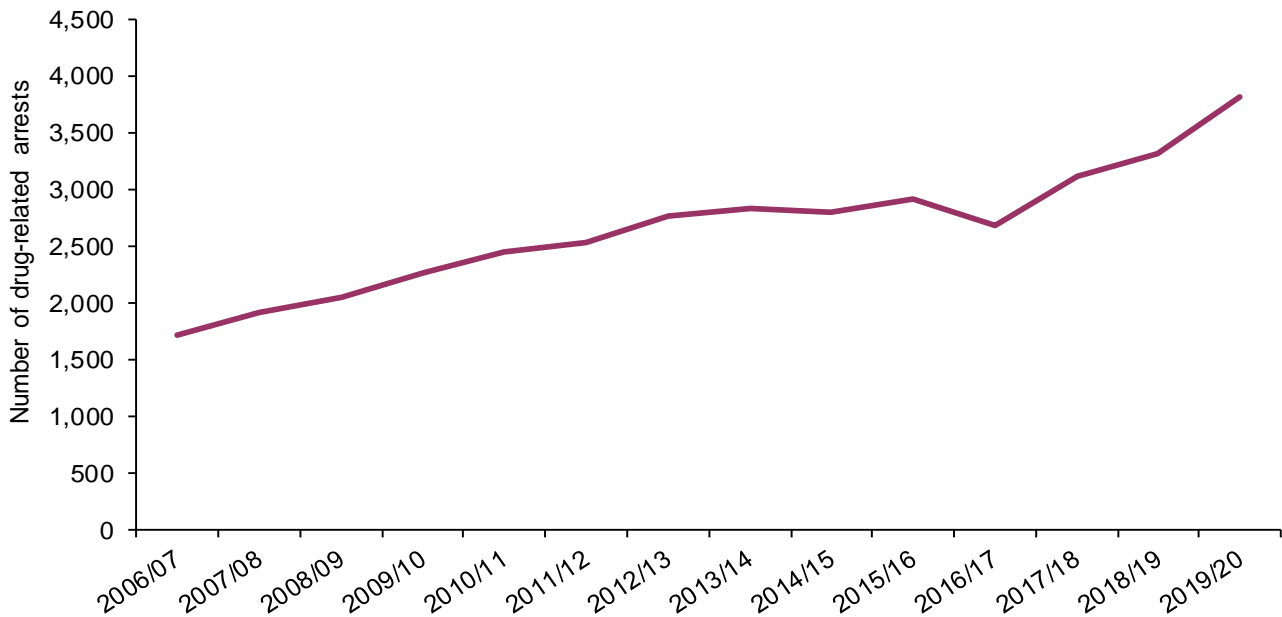
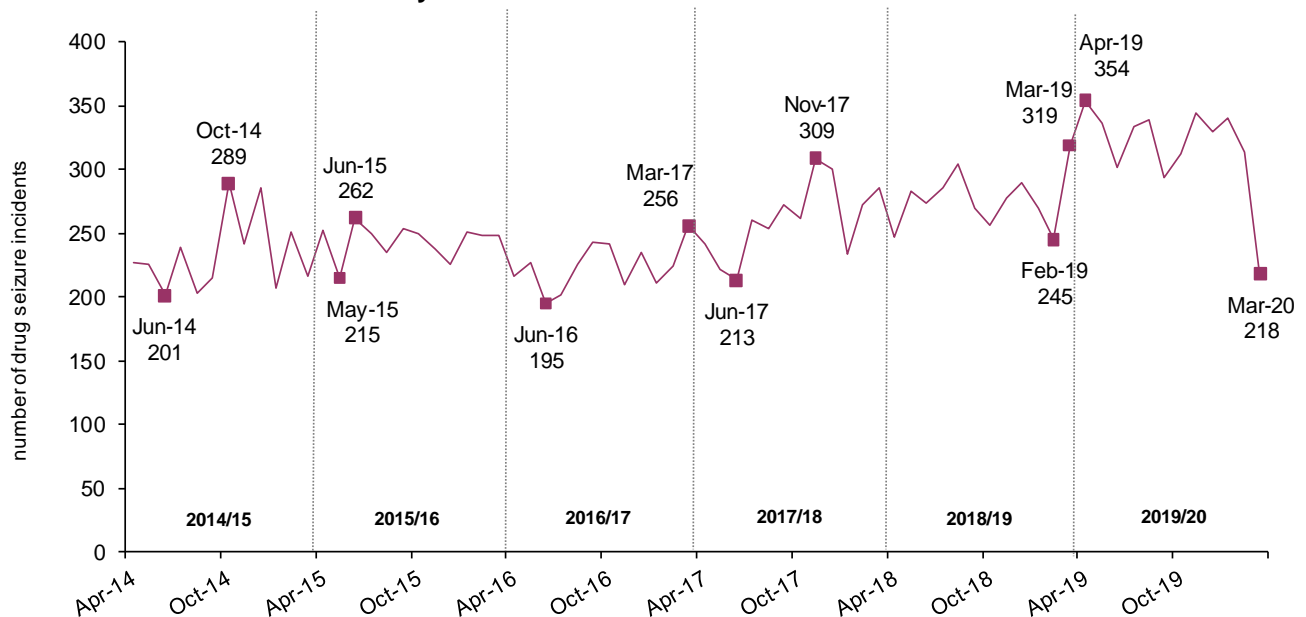


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2014. The impact of Covid-19 should be taken into account when considering the fall seen between February and March 2020.

Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2014 to March 2020, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year



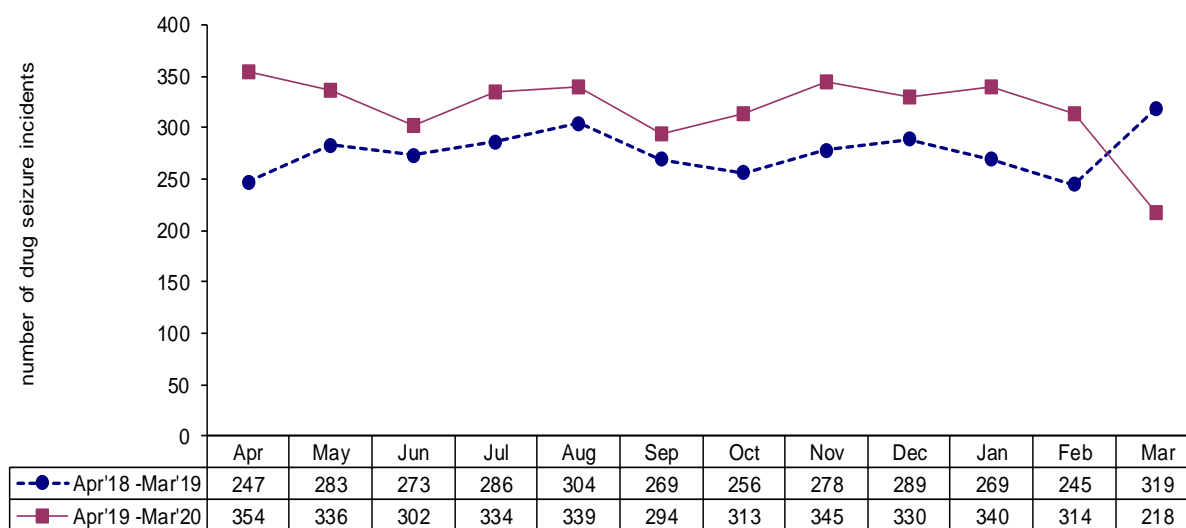
More detailed information on trends in drug arrests is available in the [Annual Trends report](#) on the PSNI website.

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

In the 12 months from 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020:

- There were 3,819 drug-related arrests, an increase of 501 (15.1 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months and continuing the upwards trend.
- The number of drug-related arrests has been higher in each month since April 2019 when compared with the same month the previous year, with the exception of March 2020 which was 101 lower than March 2019 and 96 lower than February 2020. The impact of Covid-19 should be taken into account when considering the fall seen in March 2020.
- There were 354 drug-related arrests in April 2019, the highest monthly figure seen since the start of the data series in April 2006.

Figure 8 Drug-related arrests April 2018 to March 2020



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

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, nine policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests. Belfast City showed the largest increase and accounted for 41 per cent of all drug-related arrests during the latest 12 months. [Table 3 and accompanying [spreadsheet](#)]

Figure 9 Change in drug-related arrests by policing district, 12 months to March 2020 compared with the previous 12 months

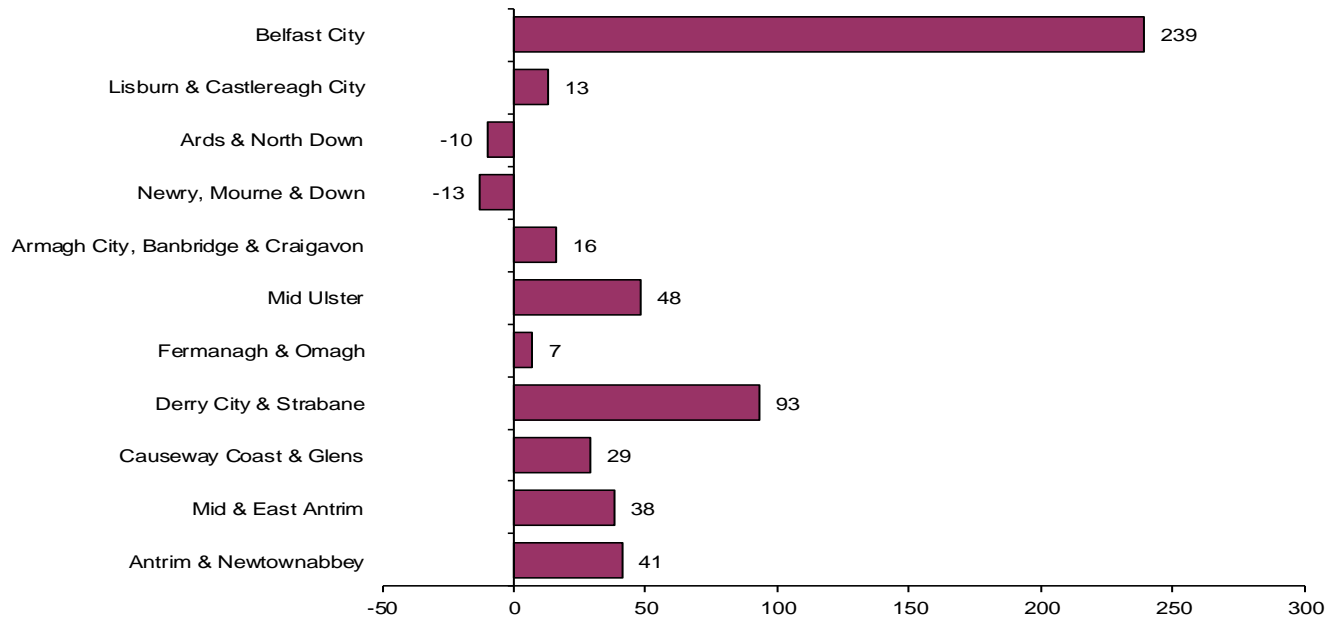


Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district

Policing district ¹	Numbers		
	Drug-related arrests		
	Apr'18-Mar'19	Apr'19-Mar'20 ²	change
Belfast City	1,320	1,559	239
<i>East</i> ³	188	183	-5
<i>North</i> ³	359	373	14
<i>South</i> ³	564	789	225
<i>West</i> ³	209	214	5
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	248	261	13
Ards & North Down	153	143	-10
Newry, Mourne & Down	187	174	-13
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	260	276	16
Mid Ulster	143	191	48
Fermanagh & Omagh	140	147	7
Derry City & Strabane	332	425	93
Causeway Coast & Glens	204	233	29
Mid & East Antrim	167	205	38
Antrim & Newtownabbey	164	205	41
Northern Ireland	3,318	3,819	501

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 40 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 in-year figures each time they are published, as records from 1st April 2019 are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes until publication of finalised figures in September 2020.

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 (ie related to the Misuse of Drugs Act or the Psychoactive Substances Act). 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 are 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 [User Guide](#).

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 at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/controlled-drugs-list--2>

Class A	Class B	Class C
Cocaine	Amphetamines	Anabolic Steroids
Ecstasy	Cannabis	Benzodiazepines
Heroin	Mephedrone	Other Class C ^{3,4}
LSD	Other Class B ²	
Methodone		
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).

⁴ Other Class C drugs also include Pregabalin and Gabapentin which were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

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 an Annual Trends report which can be accessed through: <https://www.psnipolice.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/drug-seizure-statistics/>

Publication

A [publication schedule](#) is available on the PSNI website.

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](#) format and [open document](#) format.

Related information available on the PSNI website

Police Recorded Crime Statistics: These statistics are updated on a monthly basis and a trends report is published annually, with publication dates available in the [publication schedule](#).

Crime Outcomes: The latest publication presenting the wider outcomes framework within PSNI and summarising the outcomes that have been assigned to crimes recorded by the police between 2015/16 and 2018/19 was published on 29 November 2019.

These publications can be accessed through: <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/>