Trends in Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

2006/07 to 2020/21

Contents

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.

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.

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) publishes figures on the levels and trends in police recorded drug seizures and arrests. The statistics are collated and produced by statisticians seconded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Figures were compiled on 9 September 2021; as of that date 98.0% of seizure incidents for April 2020 to March 2021 have been fully validated.

This release presents statistics relating to drug seizures and arrests recorded by the police between 2006/07 and 2020/21. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the drug seizures and arrests annual trends spreadsheet, 810KB (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 30 per cent of all drug seizure incidents and up to 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.

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] Pregabalin and gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.
[4] Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/GBL, 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon.

Application of conversion factors to the quantity of drugs seized

Most drugs can be seized in a range of formats or preparation types. In order to present seized quantities within a given drug type in terms of one comparable unit (kilograms, doses or plants), conversion factors were developed by the Home Office. These conversion factors have been applied to the main drug types in this publication in order to provide comparable estimates of the overall quantity seized for that drug (Section 3 of this publication).

The conversion factors were last updated in 2005 and the Home Office note that it is possible that some quantity data (especially for those drugs where quantity is reported in terms of doses) is not entirely accurate. However as the same conversion factors are used throughout the entire time series, the trends data can be considered reliable (Seizures of drugs in England and Wales user guide (opens in a new window), Table 1: Limitations and implications of drug seizures data)

The spreadsheet which accompanies this bulletin presents drug seizure quantities with the conversion factors applied. Drug seizure quantities are also available for the full range of formats/preparations recorded (drug seizures and arrests annual trends spreadsheet, 810KB (opens in a new window)), pivot tables - seizure incidents and quantities seized).

Conventions used in figures and tables

'0'   indicates where the weight/volume of drugs seized was less than 0.5 grams or 0.5 millilitres respectively.

'.'   Indicates that no drugs were seized

Unconverted quantity data is rounded to the nearest whole number.
Converted quantity data is rounded to the nearest 100 grams where the unit of measurement is kilograms.
Converted quantity data is rounded to the nearest 10 doses in the case of Morphine and LSD, and the nearest 100 doses in the case of Ecstasy, Anabolic Steroids and Benzodiazepines.

Key Points

- The number of drug seizure incidents recorded in 2020/21 (8,428) showed an increase of 242 (3.0 per cent) when compared with 2019/20 and is more than three times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590).

- Since 2012/13 seizures involving Class A drugs have more than doubled (from 625 to 1,508), Class C seizures have more than trebled (from 564 to 1,949) and Class B seizures are 1.6 times higher (increasing from 3,725 to 6,058).

- Cocaine is the most commonly seized Class A drug and the number of seizures involving cocaine has shown the largest increase of all Class A drugs, from 375 in 2012/13 to 1,114 in 2019/20 before falling slightly to 1,094 in 2020/21.

- Cannabis (Class B) is the most commonly seized drug overall, with herbal cannabis being the most commonly seized cannabis format. The number of herbal cannabis seizures reached their highest level in 2020/201 (5,316), around twice the number recorded in 2012/13 (2,605).

- Benzodiazepines are the most commonly seized Class C drug and, in 2020/21, they were the second most commonly seized drug across all drug classes. The number of seizure incidents involving benzodiazepines in 2020/21 (1,323) is approaching three times that recorded in 2012/13 (486).

- Since Pregabalin was reclassified as a Class C controlled substance in April 2019 it has become the second most commonly seized Class C drug with 726 seizure incidents in 2019/20 and 637 seizures in 2020/21. Gabapentin, which was also reclassified as Class C controlled substance in April 2019, has seen a lower level of seizure incidents with 59 seizures in 2019/20 and 47 in 2020/21.

- While the number of drug-related arrests recorded in 2020/21 (3,325) showed a decrease of 504 (13.2 per cent) when compared with 2019/20, it is still nearly twice the number recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

- 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 and drug-related arrests recorded since this date.

# 1. Overview of Trends in Drug Seizures and Arrests

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) showed an increase of 242 (3.0 per cent) when compared with 2019/20 and is more than three times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590 seizure incidents).

Figure 1.1 Drug seizure incidents, 2006/07 to 2020/21
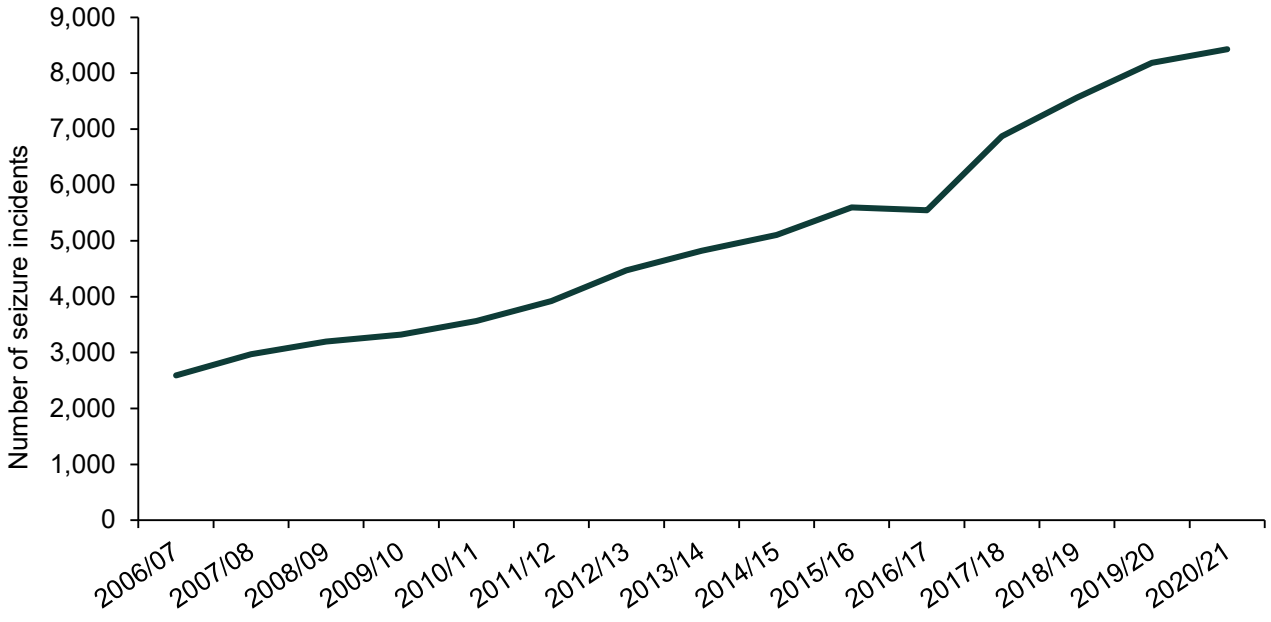
Levels of drug seizures can be influenced by policing activities and priorities in response to community concern about drugs. Changing levels of drug seizures may also be reflective of a change in the nature of the drugs market, including increased accessibility from sources such as dark web purchase and postal delivery. The influence of policing activities and priorities can also be seen in the police recorded crime figures relating to drug trafficking and possession offences. Figure 1.2 shows how closely the drug seizures trend, as previously described, follows the police recorded drug offences trend.

Figure 1.2 Police recorded drug offences and drug seizure incidents, 2006/07 to 2020/21, indexed to 2006/07=100
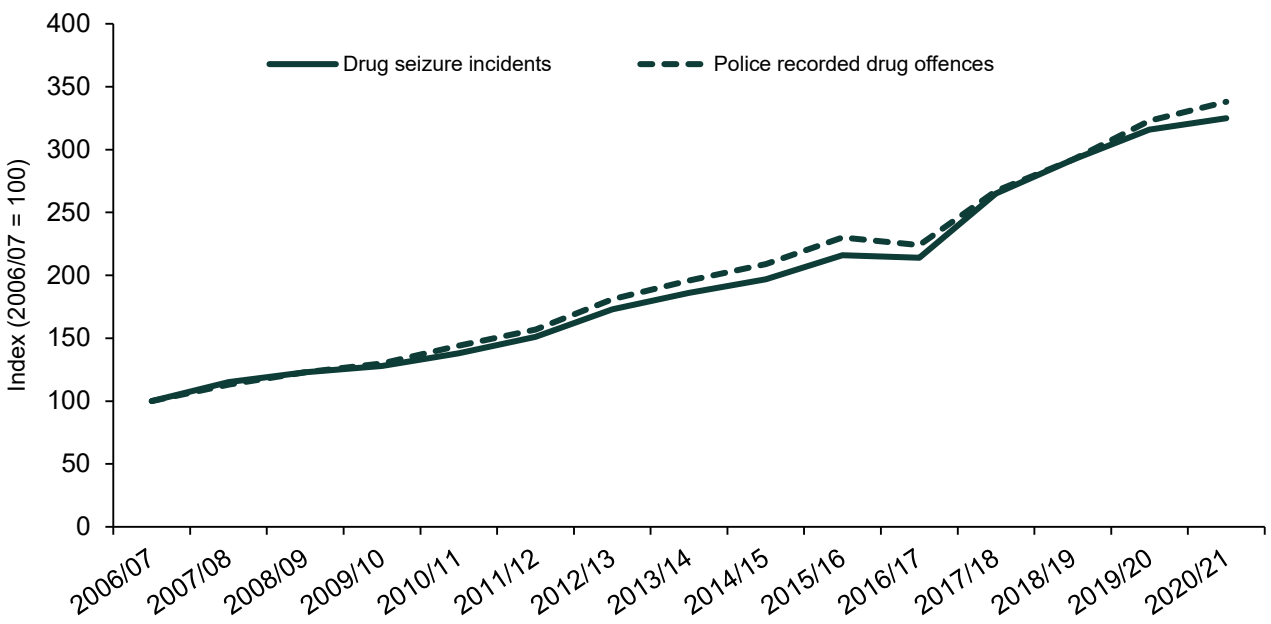
As with drug seizure incidents, the number of arrests for drug offences[1] has increased in most of the years since 2006/07 with the exception of a fall of 37 in 2014/15, a fall of 239 in 2016/17 and a fall of 504 in 2020/21. While the number recorded in 2020/21 (3,325) decreased by 13.2 per cent when compared with 2019/20, it is still nearly twice the number recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

Figure 1.3 Drug-related arrests[1], 2006/07 to 2020/21
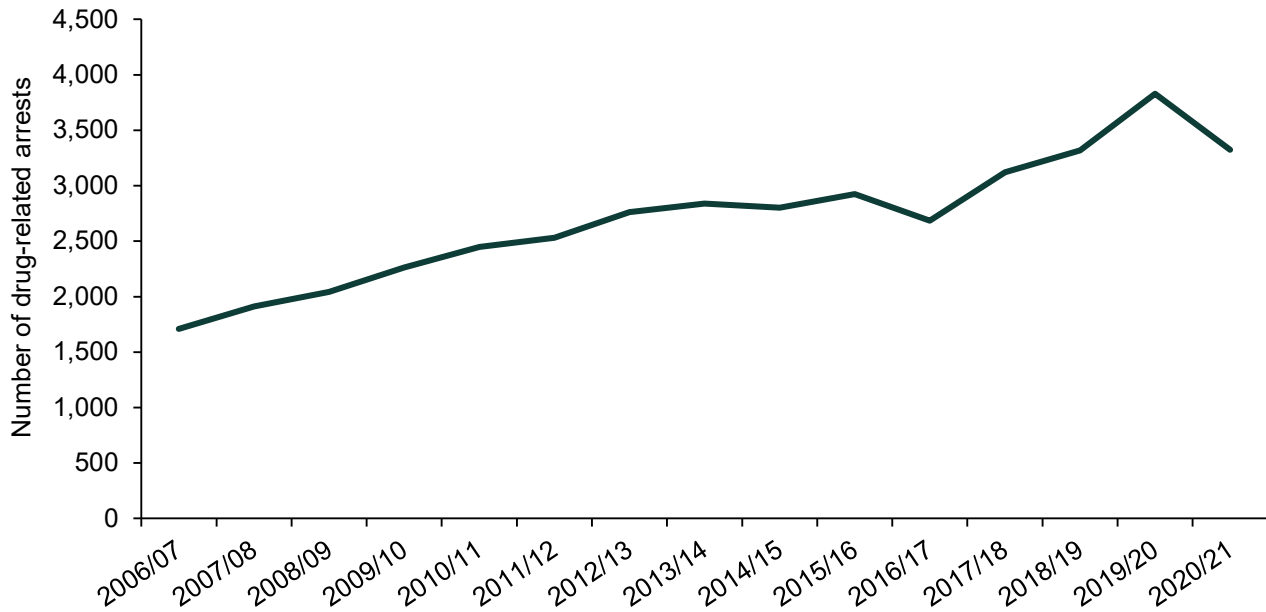
Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23rd March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizure incidents and drug-related arrests recorded since this date.

Table 1.1 Drug seizure incidents and drug-related arrests since 2006/07

	Drug seizure incidents	Drug-related arrests[1]
2006/07	2,590	1,709
2007/08	2,968	1,911
2008/09	3,198	2,044
2009/10	3,319	2,262
2010/11	3,564	2,448
2011/12	3,920	2,531
2012/13	4,474	2,763
2013/14	4,825	2,838
2014/15	5,103	2,801
2015/16	5,597	2,924
2016/17	5,546	2,685
2017/18	6,872	3,122
2018/19	7,561	3,318
2019/20	8,186	3,829
2020/21	8,428	3,325

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[1] Arrests for offences related to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

2. Trends in Drug Seizures by Class and Type of Drug

The number of drug seizure incidents has increased by 88 per cent between 2012/13 and 2020/21; seizures involving Class A drugs have increased by 2.4 times (from 625 to 1,508), Class C seizures have more than trebled (from 564 to 1,949) and Class B seizures have increased by 63 per cent (3,725 to 6,058). As the majority of seizures involve the Class B drug Cannabis, changes in levels of Cannabis seizures have the biggest impact on the overall trend.

**Figure 2.1 Number of seizures of Class A, Class B and Class C drugs, 2012/13 to 2020/21**
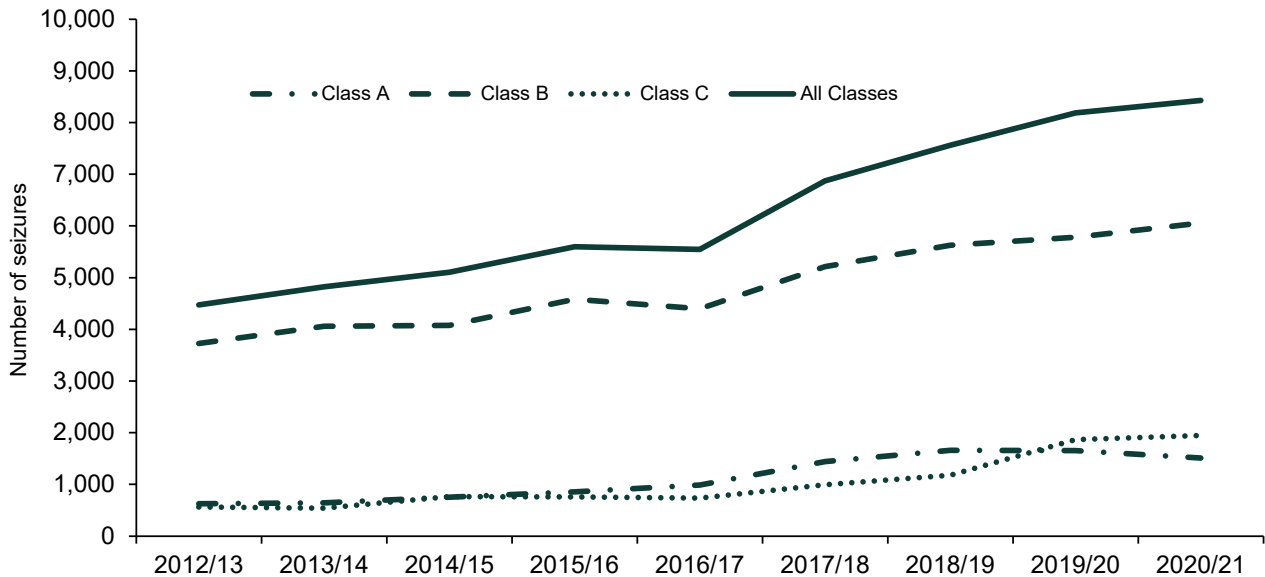
The proportion of seizures involving Class A drugs generally increased from 14 per cent in 2012/13 to 22 per cent in 2018/19 before falling in 2019/20 and again in 2020/21 to 18 per cent. The proportion of Class B drug seizures has gradually fallen, from 84 per cent in 2013/14 to 72 per cent in 2020/21. The proportion of seizures involving Class C drugs saw an increase from 11 per cent in 2013/14 to 23 per cent in both 2019/20 and 2020/21. The reclassification of Pregabalin and Gabapentin as Class C controlled substances in April 2019 resulted in a large increase in the number of seizures of Class C drugs and an increase in the proportion of seizures involving Class C Drugs from this date. With the inclusion of Pregabalin and Gabapentin in the seizure incident figures from April 2019, the distribution of seizures from this date is not directly comparable with previous years. Figure 2.2 compares the distribution since 2012/13.

Figure 2.2 Distribution of seizures involving Class A, Class B and Class C drugs[2], 2012/13 to 2020/21

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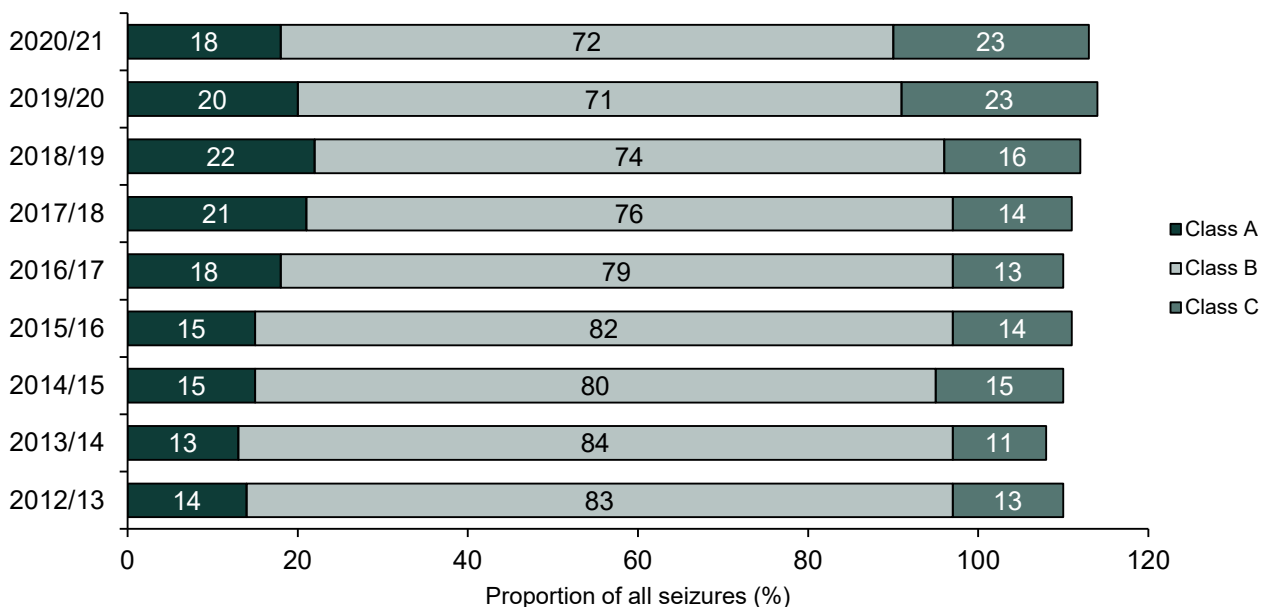
[2] As a seizure may include more than one class of drug, the number of seizures for each class of drug will sum to more than the total number of seizures and the proportions for each year will sum to more than 100%.

Class A Drugs

Cocaine is the most commonly seized Class A drug. The number of seizures involving cocaine has shown the largest increase of all Class A drugs, from 375 in 2012/13 to 1,114 in 2019/20 before falling slightly to 1,094 in 2020/21. Between 2016/17 and 2018/19 cocaine was the second most commonly seized drug across all classes, while from 2012/13 to 2015/16 and 2019/20 t0 2020/21, it was the third most commonly seized drug.

Seizures involving Morphine and LSD recorded their highest levels in 2020/21, with 19 and 21 seizures respectively. The number of seizures involving Ecstasy and Heroin reached their highest levels in 2018/19 (315 and 259 seizures respectively), with a lower number of seizures recorded in 2020/21.

The number of seizures involving Methadone generally fell between 2013/14 (30 seizures) and 2018/19 (5 seizures) followed by increases in both 2019/20 and 2020/21 to reach 22 seizure incidents. The seizure of Other Class A drugs has generally increased from 625 in 2012/13 to 106, 110 and 107 recorded in 2018/19, 2019/20 and 2020/21 respectively.

Figure 2.3 Number of seizures involving the main Class A drugs[3], 2012/13 to 2020/21
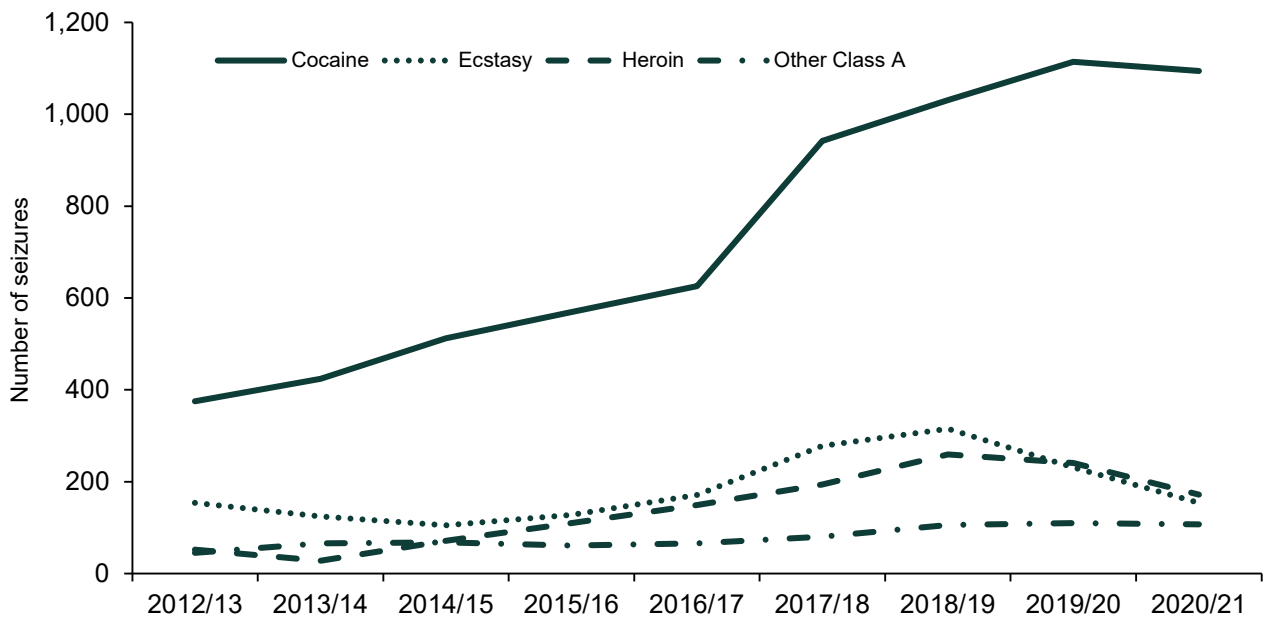
The proportion of Class A seizures involving Cocaine has increased in the latest three years from 62 per cent to 73 per cent, while the proportion of seizures involving Ecstasy and Heroin has fallen over the same period.

Figure 2.4 Distribution of seizures involving Class A drugs[4], 2012/13 to 2020/21

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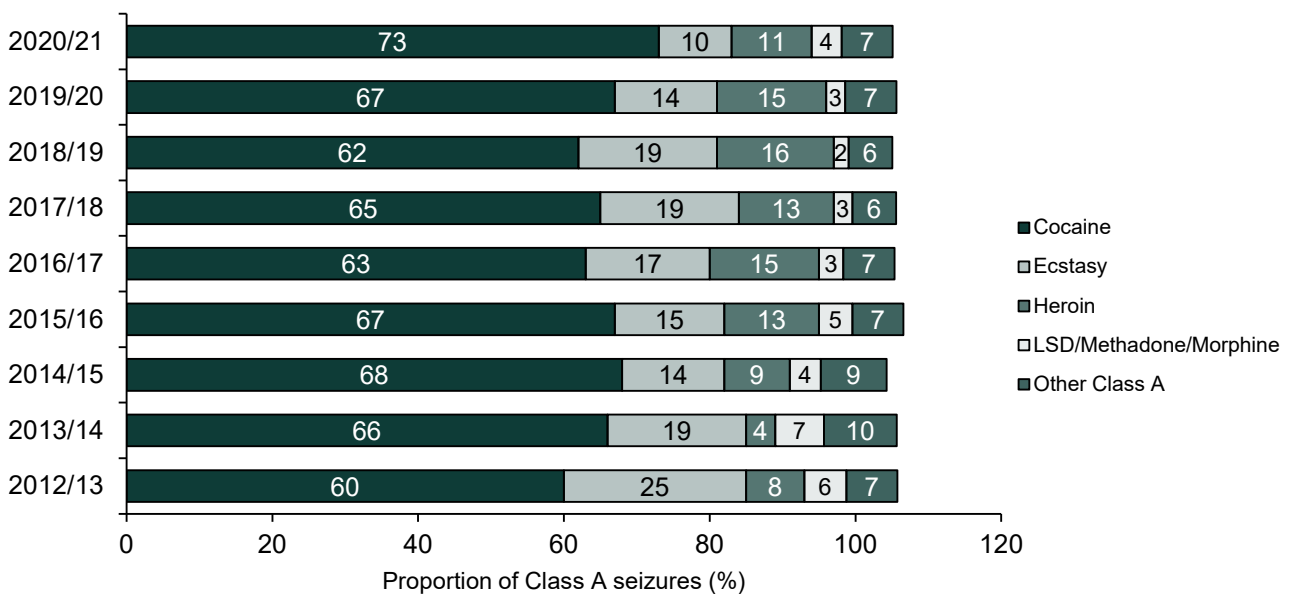
[3] The numbers of LSD, Methadone and Morphine seizure incidents are too small to be presented in Fig 2.3.
[4] As a seizure may include more than one type of Class A drug, the number of seizures for each type of Class A drug will sum to more than the total number of Class A seizures and the proportions for each year will sum to more than 100%.

Class B Drugs

Cannabis is the most commonly seized drug across all classes, with herbal cannabis being the most commonly seized cannabis format. The number of herbal cannabis seizures reached their highest level in 2020/21 (5,316), around twice the number recorded in 2012/13 (2,605). Seizures involving cannabis resin have tended to fluctuate, with the level in 2020/21 (138) the lowest recorded and nearly one sixth of the number recorded in 2017/18. Seizures of cannabis plants declined from 245 in 2013/14 to 94 in 2019/20; 131 seizures were recorded in 2020/21. As with herbal cannabis, seizures of cannabis in other formats have steadily increased since 2012/13 (301 seizures) to reach 673 in 2020/21.

Seizures involving Other Class B drugs[5] have increased over the last few years from 41 in 2016/17 to 140 in 2020/21. Mephedrone seizures have fallen since 2012/13 (130 seizure incidents), with 2 seizures recorded in 2018/19 and 7 recorded in 2020/21. Amphetamine seizures fell between 2012/13 and 2016/17 followed by a gradual increase from 51 seizures in 2016/17 to 131 seizures in 2020/21, the highest level recorded.

Figure 2.5 Number of seizures involving Cannabis in its various formats, 2012/13 to 2020/21

The proportion of Class B seizures involving Herbal Cannabis has generally increased from 70 per cent in 2012/13 to 88 per cent in 2020/21 whilst the proportion involving Cannabis Resin has fallen in recent years.

Figure 2.6 Distribution of seizures involving Class B drugs[6,7], 2012/13 to 2020/21

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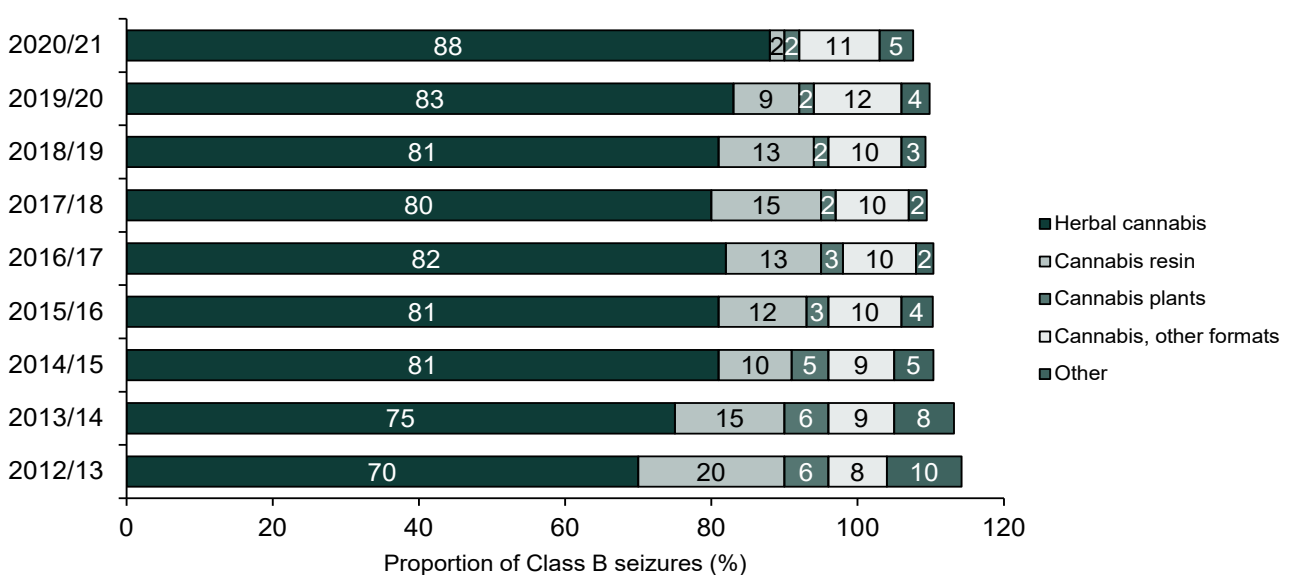
[5] Other Class B drugs include cathinone derivatives, codeine/dihydrocodeine, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), ketamine and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.
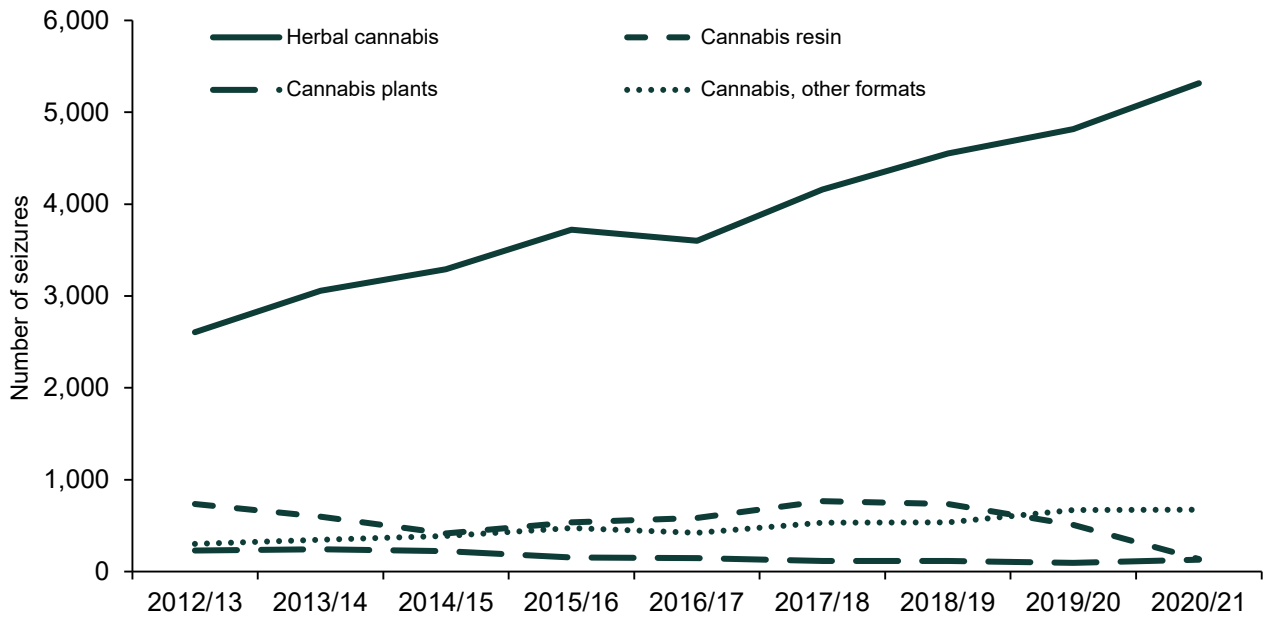[6] As a seizure may include more than one type of Class B drug, the number of seizures for each type of Class B drug will sum to more than the total number of Class B seizures and the proportions for each year will sum to more than 100%.
[7] Other includes Amphetamines, Mephedrone and Other Class B drugs.

Class C Drugs

Benzodiazepines are the most commonly seized Class C drug. The number of seizure incidents involving benzodiazepines reached its highest level of 1,323 in 2020/21, nearly three times the number recorded in 2012/13 (486). Between 2012/13 and 2015/16, and 2019/20 to 2020/21, benzodiazepines were the second most commonly seized drug across all classes.

The reclassification of Pregabalin and Gabapentin as Class C controlled substances in April 2019 resulted in a large increase in the number of seizures of Class C drugs, from 1,178 in 2018/19 to 1,869 in 2019/20 and 1,949 in 2020/21. Pregabalin seizures accounted for 39 per cent and 33 per cent of Class C seizures in 2019/20 and 2020/21 respectively while Gabapentin seizures accounted for 3 per cent and 2 per cent respectively. Since reclassification in April 2019 Pregabalin has become the second most commonly seized Class C drug.

Figure 2.7 Number of seizures involving Class C drugs, 2012/13 to 2020/21
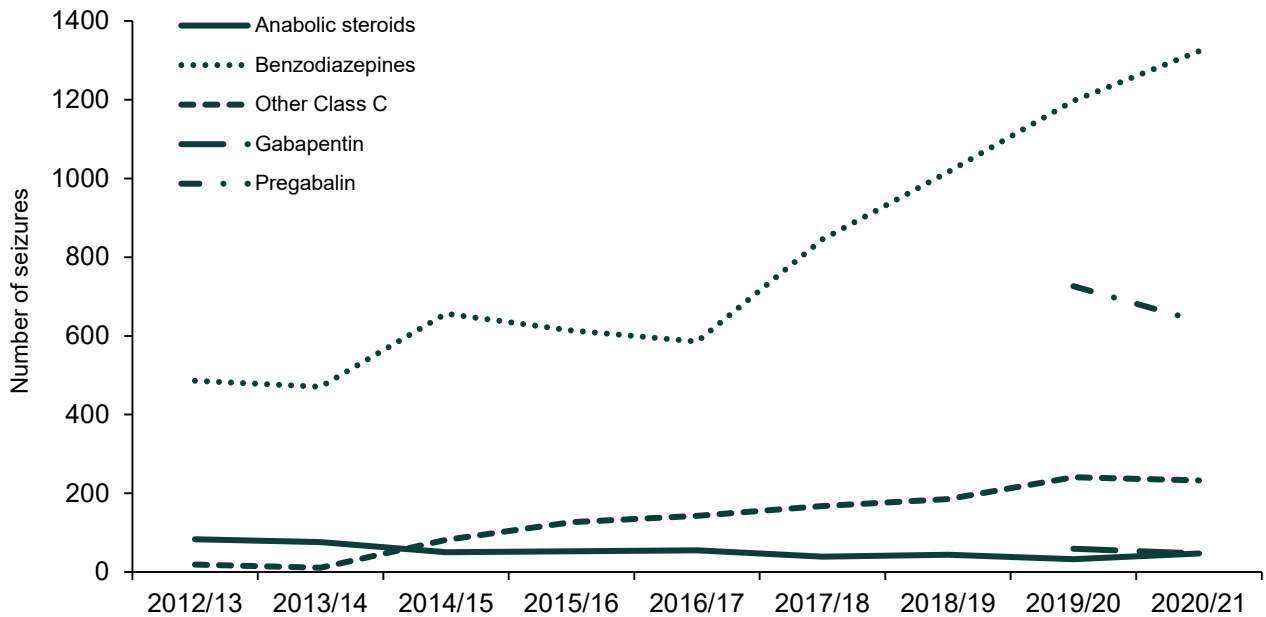
The inclusion of Pregabalin and Gabapentin within the seizure incident figures from April 2019 has had an impact on the distribution of Class C seizures. As a result of this change, the distribution of seizures within Class C between 2012/13 and 2018/19 is not directly comparable with that seen in 2019/20 and 2020/21.

Figure 2.8 Distribution of seizures involving Class C drugs[8], 2012/13 to 2020/21

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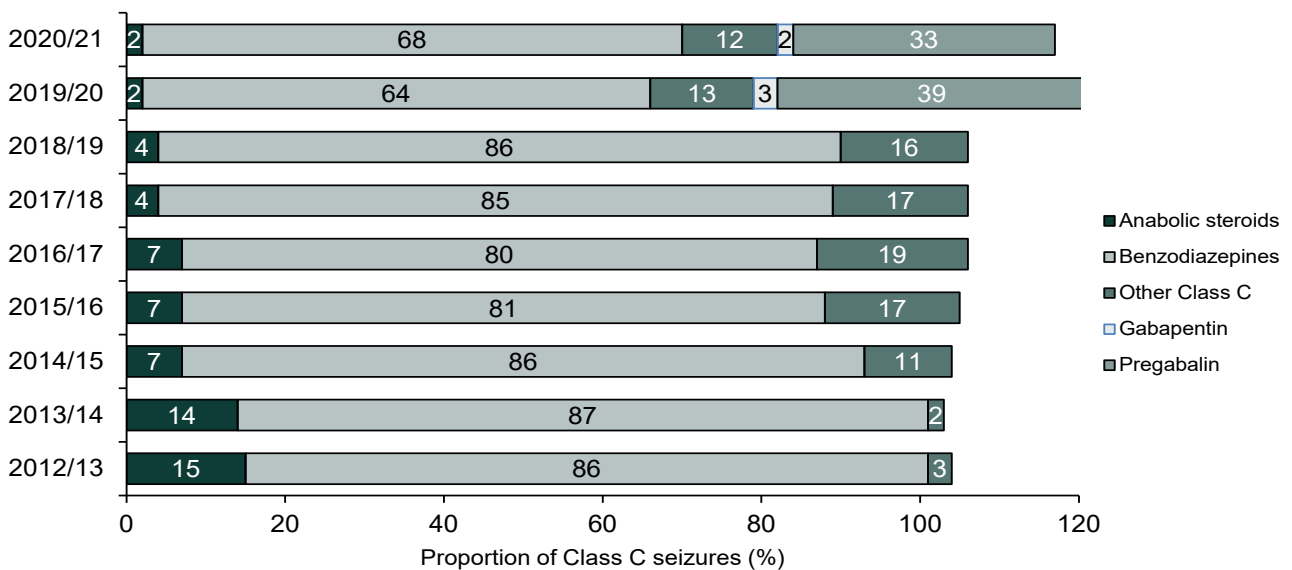
[8] As a seizure may include more than one type of Class C drug, the number of seizures for each type of Class C drug will sum to more than the total number of Class C seizures and the proportions for each year will sum to more than 100%.

New Psychoactive Substances

The [Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 (opens in a new window)](#) (PSA) came into effect in May 2016, in response to the emergence of an increasing number of substances which were not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA). This act created a blanket ban on the production, distribution, sale and supply of psychoactive substances in the UK for human consumption. Psychoactive substances that are within the scope of the PSA are referred to as New Psychoactive Substances (NPS).

A psychoactive substance is defined as any substance intended for human consumption that is capable of producing a psychoactive effect. In general, NPS are drugs designed to replicate the effects of other illegal substances. Before the PSA was introduced they were commonly referred to as 'legal highs'.

Seizure Incidents

The number of seizure incidents involving NPS in 2020/21 was 147, a decrease of 19 when compared with 2019/20. The majority of NPS seizures in 2020/20 were of Flualprazolam which was first recorded as a New Psychoactive Substance in April 2019.

Cannabis Cultivation

In the latest guidance from the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC), commercial cultivation of cannabis is defined as:
- Twenty-five or more cannabis plants, at any stage of growth (germination), are being or have been grown; or
- There is evidence of a cannabis farm.

The definition of a cannabis farm is:
- The premises, or part therein, has been adapted to such an extent that normal usage would be inhibited and usually present within the premises, or part therein, are items solely concerned for the production of cannabis, i.e.: hydroponics system, high intensity lighting, ventilation/extraction fans, any other associated equipment, and/or electricity meter bypassed (abstraction of electricity).

In addition to the above, the overall appearance of the venue, together with available intelligence also indicates if the site was, is, or is intended to be a cannabis farm, irrespective of the number of plants present on the site. For example there may be no plants but the site has been made ready to commence cultivation.

While the overall number of seizure incidents involving cannabis cultivation reached 143 in 2014/15, the number has since fallen, with 14 recorded in 2020/21.

Figure 2.9 Cannabis cultivation, 2012/13 to 2020/21
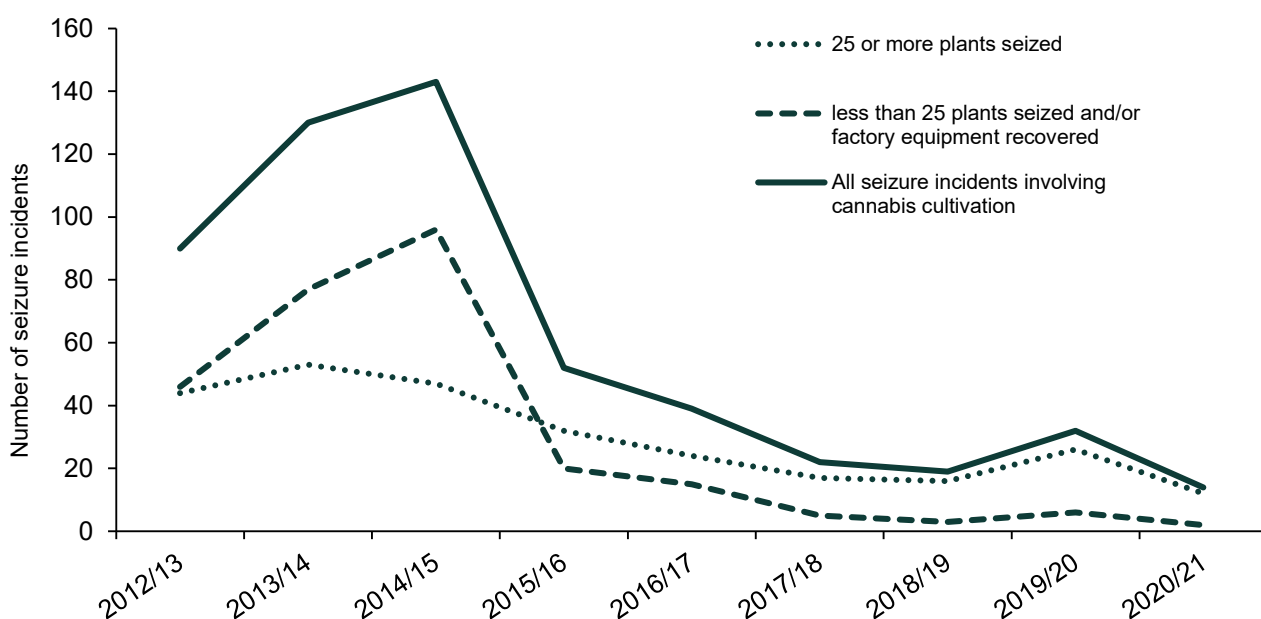
3. Trends in Drug Seizures by Quantity of Drugs Seized

Most drugs can be seized in a range of formats. In order to present seized quantities within a given drug type in terms of comparable units (kilograms, doses or plants), conversion factors developed by the Home Office have been applied to estimate the overall quantity of drugs seized.

In this section, drug seizure quantities with the conversion factors applied are presented as estimated totals, summarised in kilograms, doses and plants. The raw, unconverted quantities for each drug type and format are available in the drug seizures and arrests annual trends spreadsheet, 810KB (opens in a new window) pivot tables - seizure incidents and quantities seized.

Totals for the quantities of drugs seized can be greatly influenced by small numbers of large seizures. Quantities seized should not be taken as an indication of drug prevalence or availability.

Class A Drugs

Conversion factors have been applied to the following Class A drugs and they are summarised as follows:

Summarised in kilograms	Summarised in thousands of doses
Cocaine	Ecstasy
Heroin	LSD (weighed amounts excluded)
	Morphine

Class A, weights seized (converted amounts)

Cocaine: Seizures of cocaine have ranged in weight from 11.6kg in 2012/13 to 81.0kg in 2014/15. There was 30.9kg seized in 2020/21, an increase when compared with 2019/20 (22.2kg).

Heroin: The quantity of heroin seized is much lower than that for cocaine, ranging from 0.1kg in 2013/14 to 5.1kg 2016/17. The figure for 2016/17 is the only year since 2012/13 when the weight of heroin seized has exceeded 1kg; this is mainly attributed to one seizure accounting for around three quarters of the total weight seized in that year. There was 0.3kg of heroin seized in 2020/21, down from 0.4kg in 2019/20 and, along with 2014/15, the second lowest weight seized since 2012/13.

Figure 3.1 Quantities of Cocaine and Heroin seized (kg), 2012/13 to 2020/21
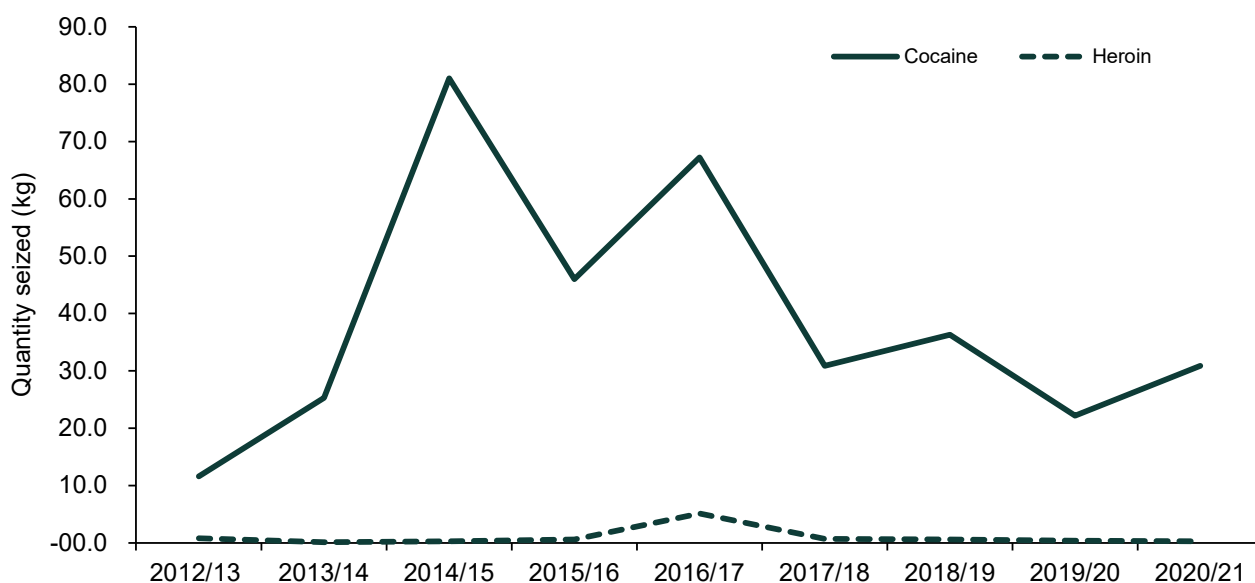
In 2020/21 nearly four fifths of cocaine seizures involved quantities less than 5g in weight. During the same period, 77 per cent of heroin seizures involved quantities of less than 1g (Figure 3.2).

Figures 3.3 and 3.4 present the distribution of cocaine and heroin seizures since 2012/13, showing both the number of seizure incidents and the smaller proportions where the quantity seized is 5g or more.

Figure 3.2 Distribution of the quantities of Cocaine and Heroin seized by weight (kg), 2020/21

Heroin seizure incidents = 172, weight seized = 0.3kg

Heroin: 77 | 15 | 8

Cocaine seizure incidents = 1,094, weight seized = 30.9kg

Cocaine: 36 | 43 | 20 | 1

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

■ Under 1g □ 1g to 4 g ■ 5g to 499g □ 500g and over
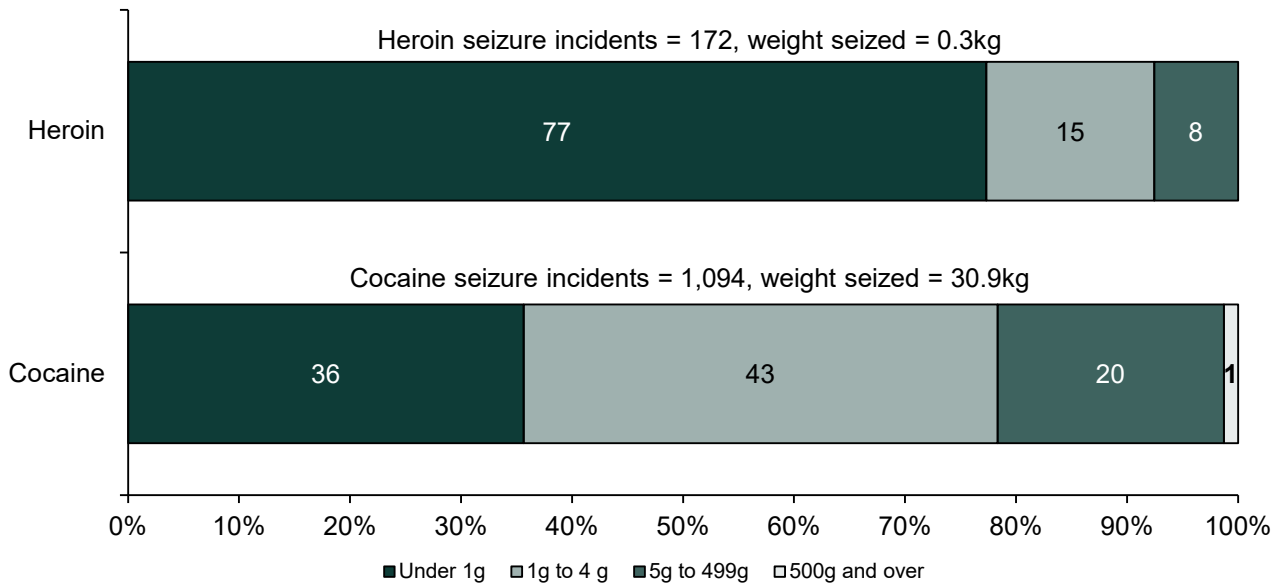
Figure 3.3 Number of Class A Cocaine seizure incidents by weight seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Year	incidents under 1g	incidents 1g to 4g	incidents 5g and over
2020/21	390	467	237
2019/20	371	519	224
2018/19	351	481	199
2017/18	294	457	191
2016/17	200	271	155
2015/16	174	255	140
2014/15	132	235	145
2013/14	144	158	122
2012/13	122	165	88

0 200 400 600 800 1000 1200
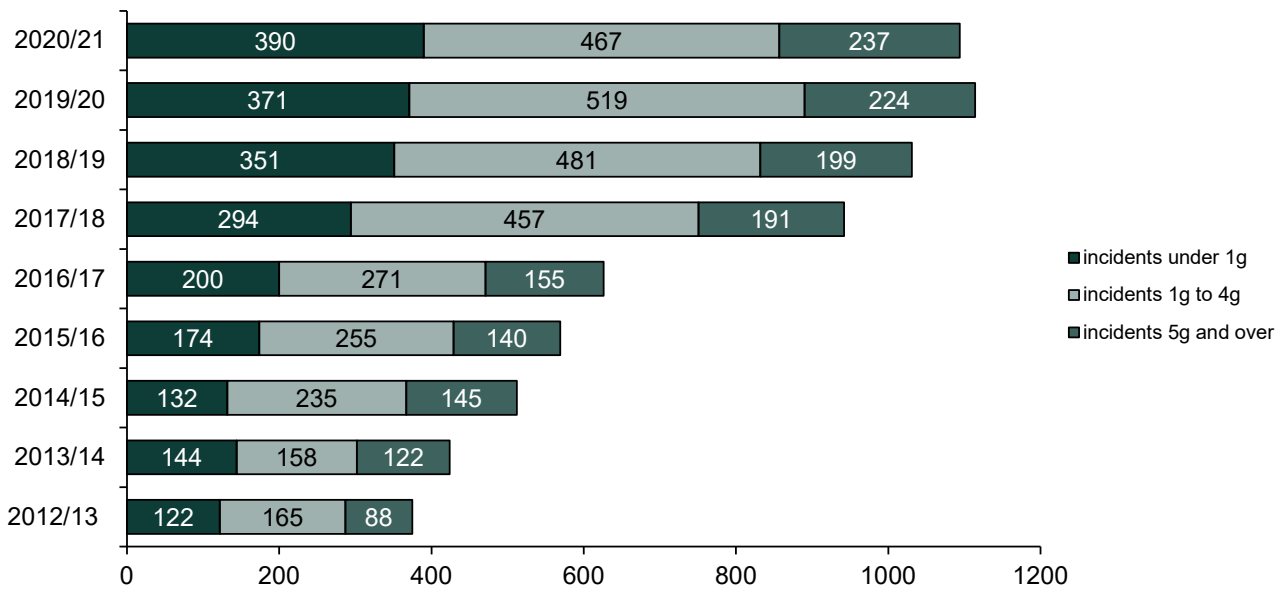
Figure 3.4 Number of Class A Heroin seizure incidents by weight seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Year	incidents under 1g	incidents 1g to 4g	incidents 5g and over
2020/21	133	26	13
2019/20	175	50	16
2018/19	186	57	16
2017/18	138	35	21
2016/17	97	35	17
2015/16	81	23	6
2014/15	47	13	11
2013/14	16	9	3
2012/13	37	10	5

0 50 100 150 200 250 300
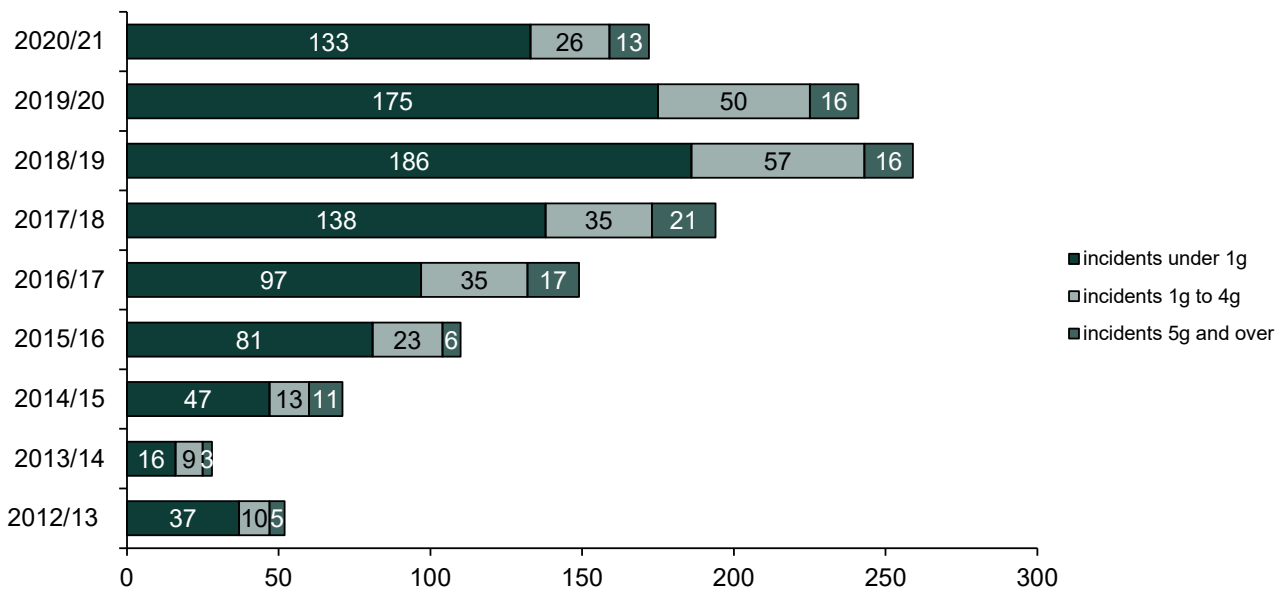
Class A, doses seized (converted amounts)

Ecstasy: Seizures of ecstasy have ranged from 4,500 doses in 2014/15 to 21,200 doses in 2015/16. In 2020/21 there were 8,300 doses seized, a decrease on the 13,100 doses seized the previous year and the third lowest number of doses seized since 2012/13.

LSD: Since 2012/13 there have been 109 seizures of LSD (excluding weighed amounts)[9], adding to an estimated 7,510 doses in total and ranging from fewer than 10 in 2012/13 to 2,610 in 2015/16. There were approximately 1,090 doses seized in 2020/21, an increase from the 100 doses seized in 2019/20.

Morphine: There have been 86 morphine seizures since 2012/13, amounting to an estimated 1,730 doses in total and ranging from around 60 in 2012/13 to approximately 510 in 2019/20. There were approximately 200 doses seized in 2020/21, a decrease from the 510 doses seized in 2019/20.

Figure 3.5 Quantities of Ecstasy, LSD and Morphine seized (doses, 000s), 2012/13 to 2020/21
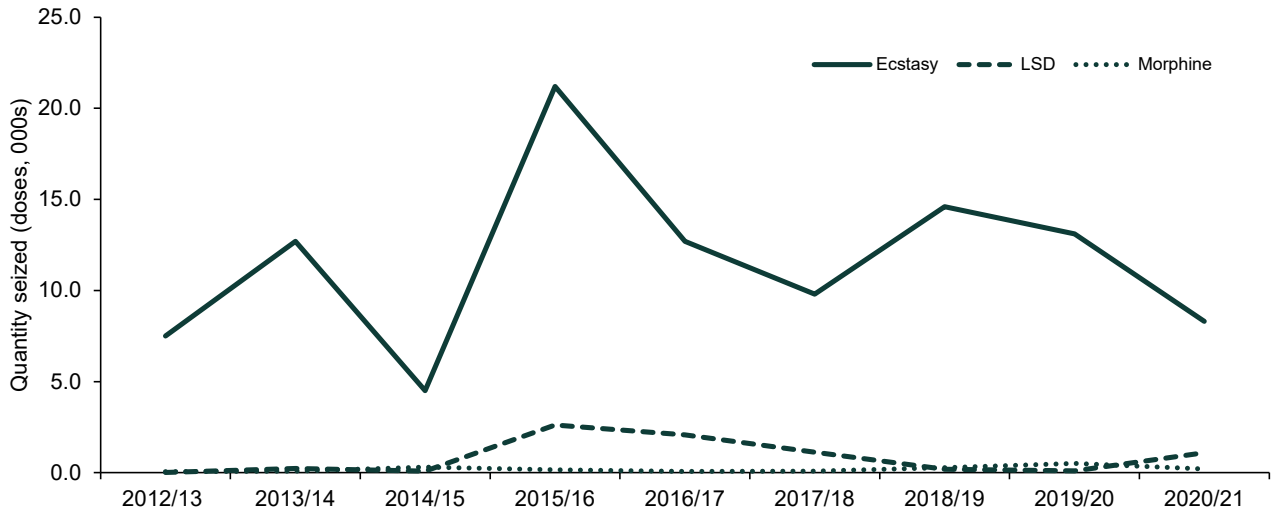
In 2020/21 more than half of ecstasy and morphine seizures involved more than 5 doses, while just over one third of LSD seizures involved more than 5 doses (Figure 3.6).

Figures 3.7 to 3.9 present the distribution of ecstasy, LSD and morphine seizures since 2012/13, showing both the changing number of seizure incidents and the smaller proportions where the quantity seized is 51 or more doses. More than four fifths of ecstasy and morphine seizures involve quantities of 50 doses or less, except for 2014/15 when the proportion for morphine was two thirds.

Figure 3.6 Distribution of the quantities of Ecstasy, LSD and Morphine seized (doses), 2020/21

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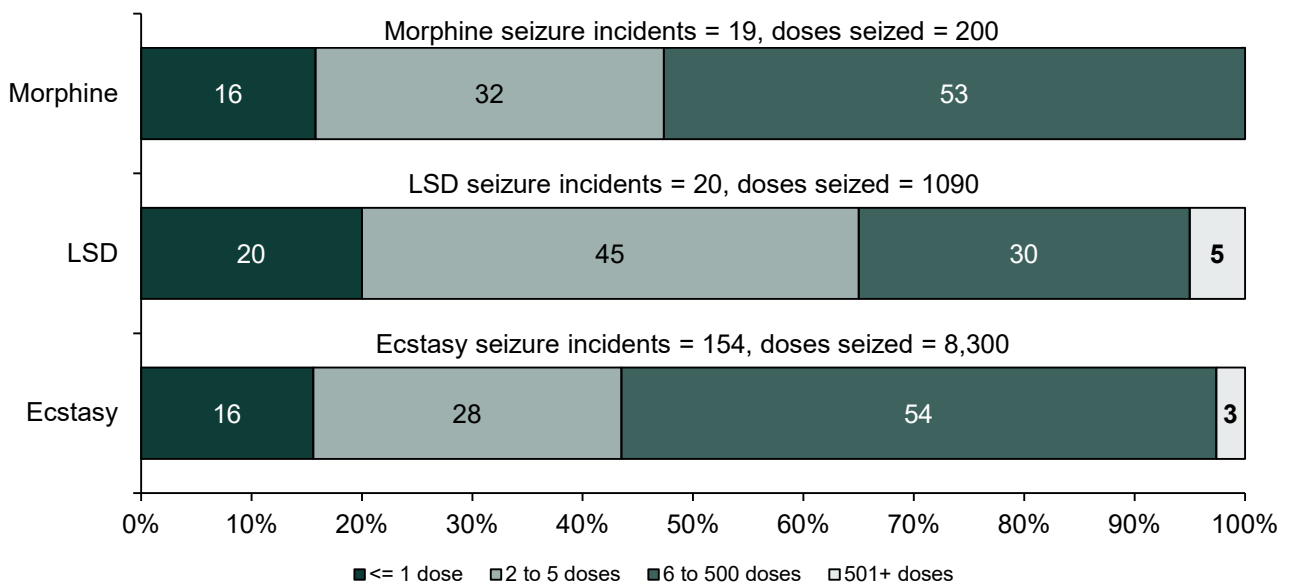
[9] Weighed amounts of LSD are not included in the figures; this is in line with Home Office presentation of this drug type.

Figure 3.7 Number of Class A Ecstasy seizure incidents by doses seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Legend:
- incidents up to 5 doses
- incidents 6 to 50 doses
- incidents 51 doses and over

Year	incidents up to 5 doses	incidents 6 to 50 doses	incidents 51 doses and over
2020/21	67	58	29
2019/20	109	88	34
2018/19	179	102	34
2017/18	144	94	40
2016/17	88	59	24
2015/16	65	47	16
2014/15	66	29	10
2013/14	49	57	18
2012/13	64	63	27
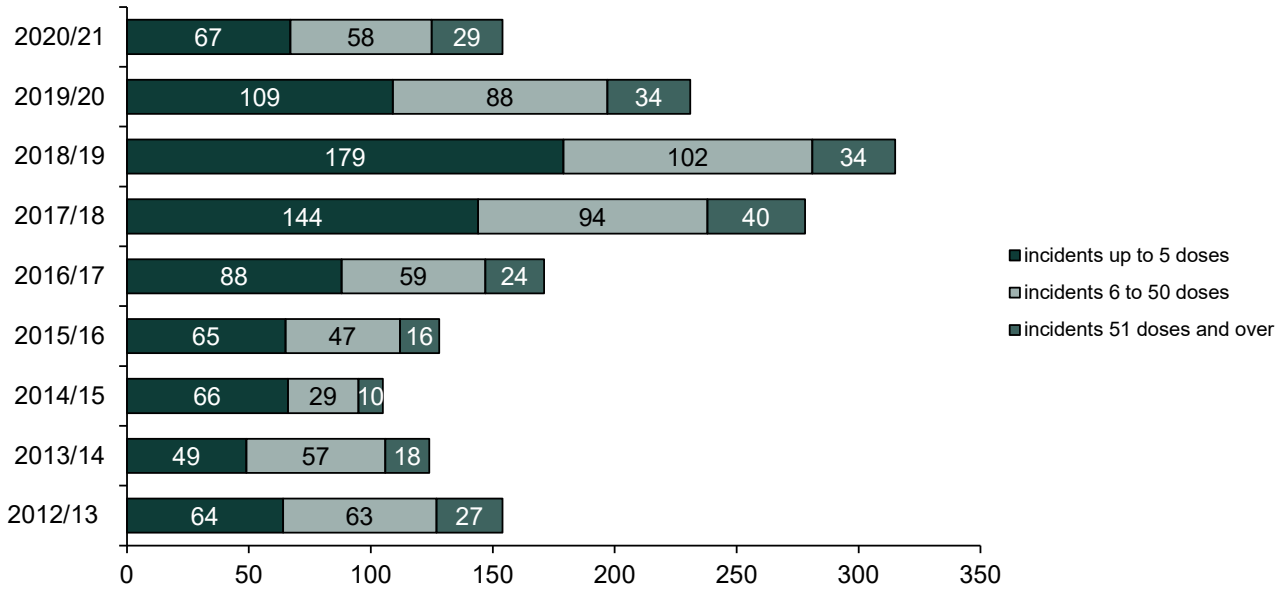
Figure 3.8 Number of Class A LSD seizure incidents by doses seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Legend:
- incidents up to 5 doses
- incidents 6 to 50 doses
- incidents 51 doses and over

Year	incidents up to 5 doses	incidents 6 to 50 doses	incidents 51 doses and over
2020/21	13	6	1
2019/20	9	6	
2018/19	11	5	1
2017/18	10	7	1
2016/17	9	2	1
2015/16	6	3	3
2014/15	4	4	
2013/14	4	2	
2012/13	1		
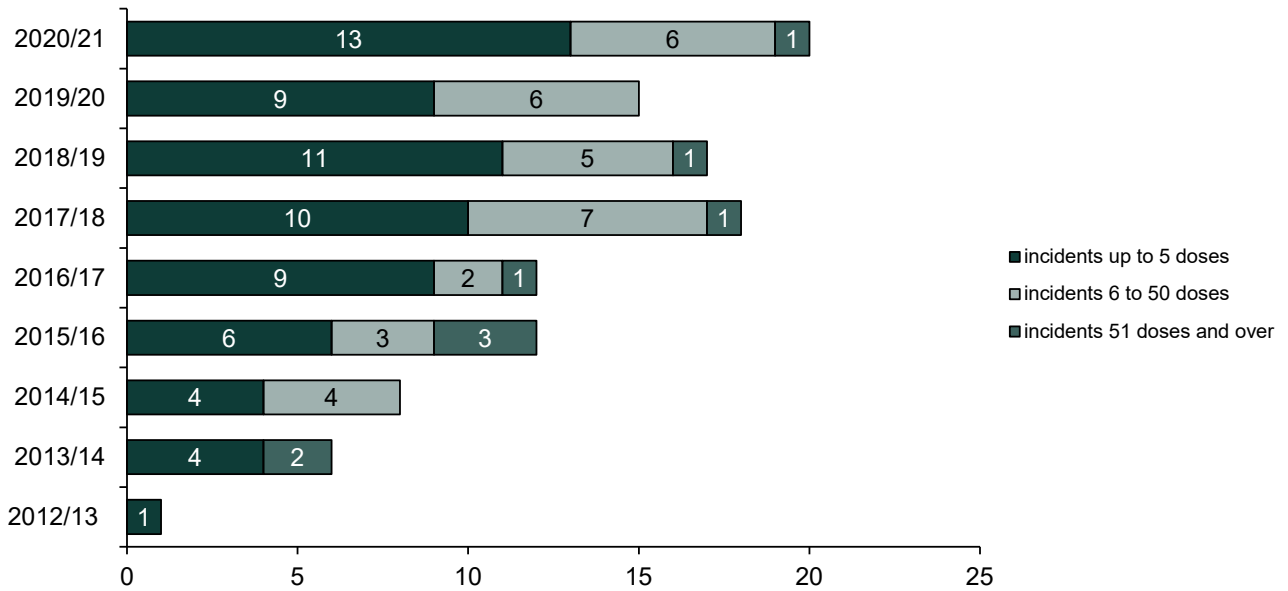
Figure 3.9 Number of Class A Morphine seizure incidents by doses seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Legend:
- incidents up to 5 doses
- incidents 6 to 50 doses
- incidents 51 doses and over

Year	incidents up to 5 doses	incidents 6 to 50 doses	incidents 51 doses and over
2020/21	9	9	1
2019/20	6	7	3
2018/19	3	5	1
2017/18	10	1	1
2016/17	2	4	
2015/16	4	2	1
2014/15	1	1	1
2013/14	4	3	
2012/13	4	3	
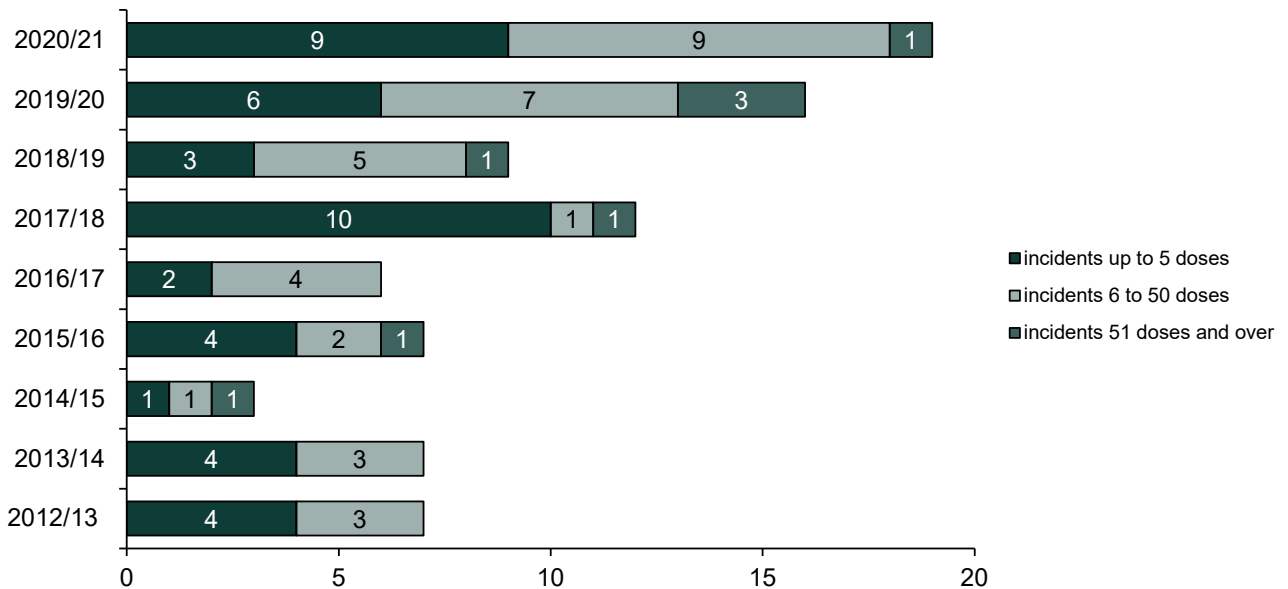
Class B Drugs

Conversion factors have been applied to the following Class B drugs and they are summarised as follows:

Summarised in kilograms	Summarised in thousands of plants
Herbal cannabis	Cannabis plants
Cannabis resin	
Amphetamines	

Class B, cannabis weights and plants seized (converted amounts)

Herbal cannabis: The weight of herbal cannabis seized was at its lowest in 2014/15 (232.5kg) before generally increasing to reach 1,475.5kg in 2020/21. The weight seized in 2020/21 was more than 2.5 times higher than that seized the previous year (555.8kg); this included 7 herbal cannabis seizures of 10kg or more, with one of these seizures being approximately 916kg.
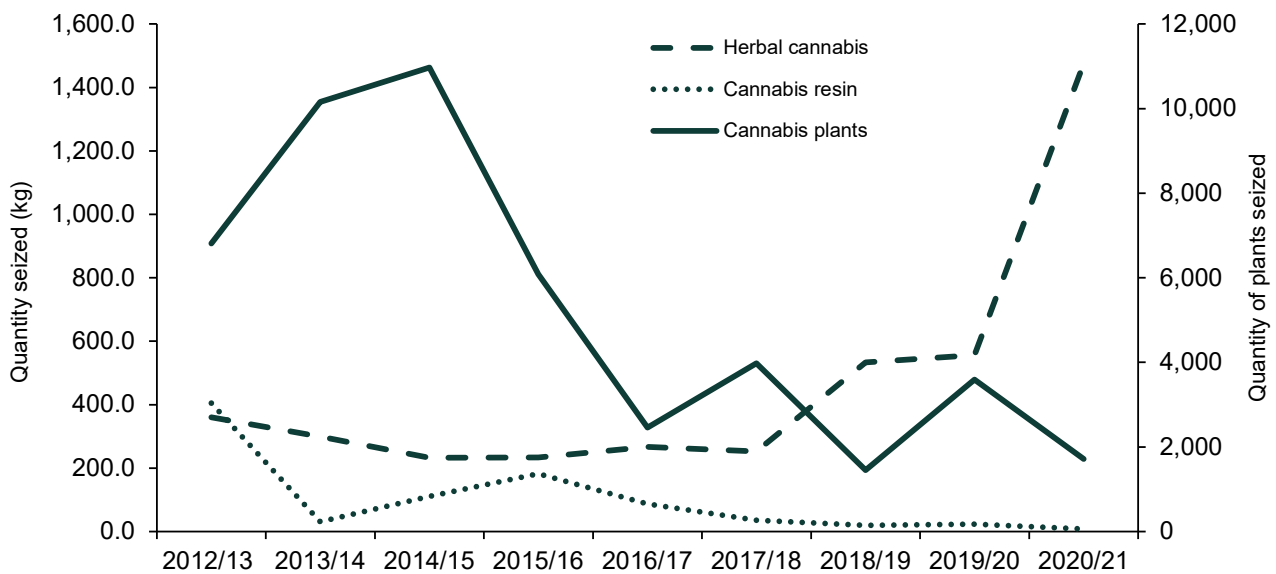
Cannabis resin: The weight of cannabis resin seized has fallen in most of the years since 2012/13. In 2012/13 the weight of cannabis resin seized (404.5kg) was higher than the weight of herbal cannabis seized (360.3kg), although this pattern is reversed in each subsequent year. The higher levels seen in 2012/13 and 2015/16 were influenced by a small number of large seizures. Two seizures in 2012/13 accounted for close to three quarters of the total seized in that year, while one seizure in 2015/16 accounted for 90 per cent of the total seized. There was 8.0kg seized in 2020/21 compared with 23.1kg in 2019/20, the lowest amount seized since 2012/13.

Cannabis plants: Seizures of cannabis plants increased from 2012/13 (6,813 plants) to reach 10,974 plants seized in 2014/15. The number of plants seized has fallen since then, with 1,717 plants seized in 2020/21, the second lowest number seized since 2012/13.

Figure 3.10 Quantity of Cannabis seized in its various formats (kg and plants), 2012/13 to 2020/21

Approximately three quarters of herbal cannabis seizures and around 70 per cent of cannabis resin seizures in 2020/21 involved weights less than 5g. Just over two fifths of cannabis plant seizures in 2020/21 involved at least 6 plants (Figure 3.11).

Figures 3.12 to 3.14 present the distribution of herbal cannabis, cannabis resin and cannabis plant seizures since 2012/13, showing the increasing proportion of herbal cannabis seizure incidents of less than 1g and the decreasing proportion of cannabis plant seizures where more than 50 plants were seized. Since 2012/13 at least three quarters of the herbal cannabis seizures each year have involved weights less than 5g. The proportions by weight seized for cannabis resin remain relatively consistent throughout the data series, as seen in Figure 3.13 which also shows the large fall in cannabis resin seizures in 2020/21.

Information on the commercial cultivation of cannabis can be found on page 11.

Figure 3.11 Distribution of the quantities of Cannabis seized (kg and plants), 2020/21
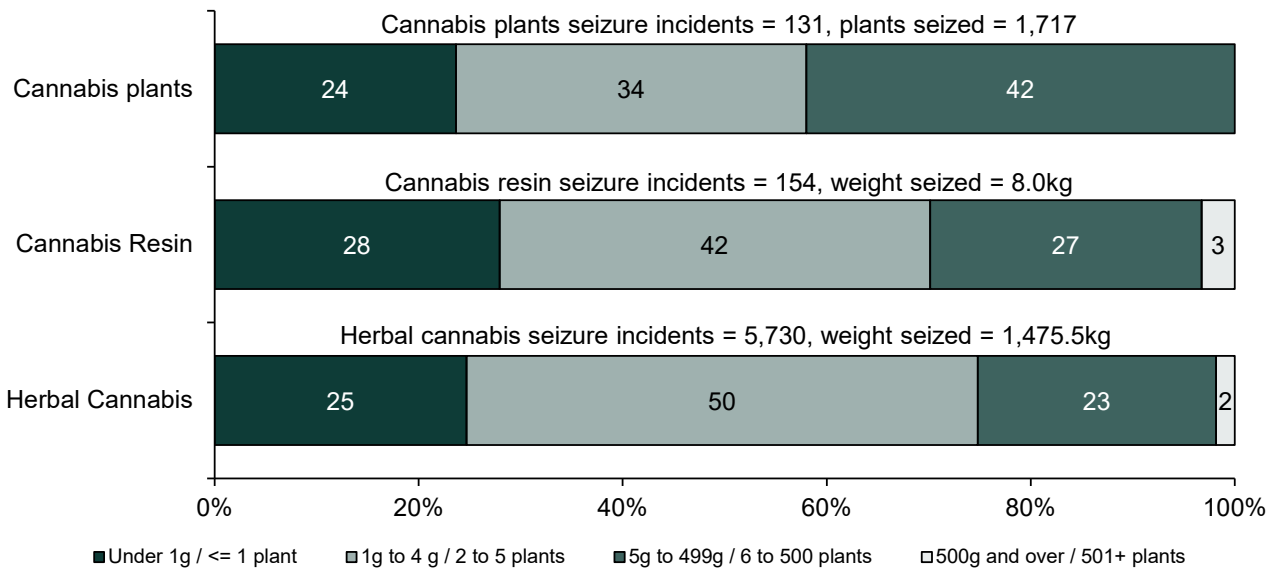
Cannabis plants seizure incidents = 131, plants seized = 1,717

| Cannabis plants | 24 | 34 | 42 |

Cannabis resin seizure incidents = 154, weight seized = 8.0kg

| Cannabis Resin | 28 | 42 | 27 | 3 |

Herbal cannabis seizure incidents = 5,730, weight seized = 1,475.5kg

| Herbal Cannabis | 25 | 50 | 23 | 2 |

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

■ Under 1g / <= 1 plant   □ 1g to 4 g / 2 to 5 plants   ■ 5g to 499g / 6 to 500 plants   □ 500g and over / 501+ plants

Figure 3.12 Number of Class B Herbal cannabis seizure incidents by weight seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Year	incidents under 1g	incidents 1g to 4g	incidents 5g and over
2020/21	1,414	2,873	1,443
2019/20	1,280	2,696	1,231
2018/19	1,266	2,500	1,079
2017/18	1,102	2,412	909
2016/17	952	2,060	787
2015/16	1,038	2,113	813
2014/15	856	1,768	848
2013/14	871	1,615	745
2012/13	749	1,382	613

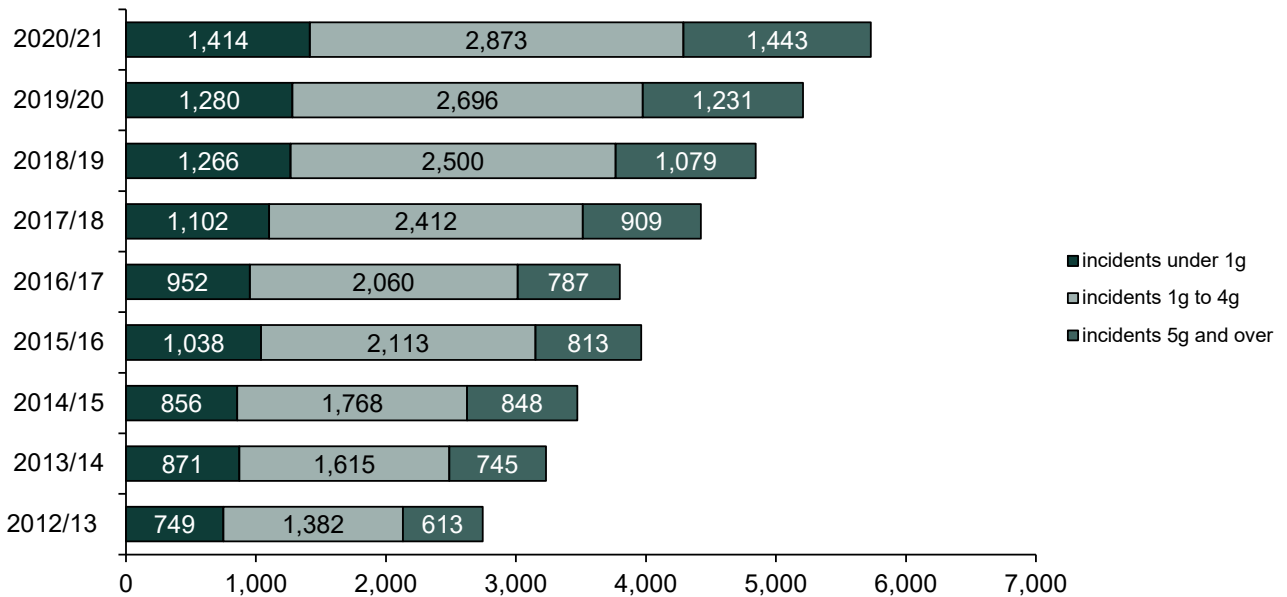0   1,000   2,000   3,000   4,000   5,000   6,000   7,000

Figure 3.13 Number of Class B Cannabis resin seizure incidents by weight seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

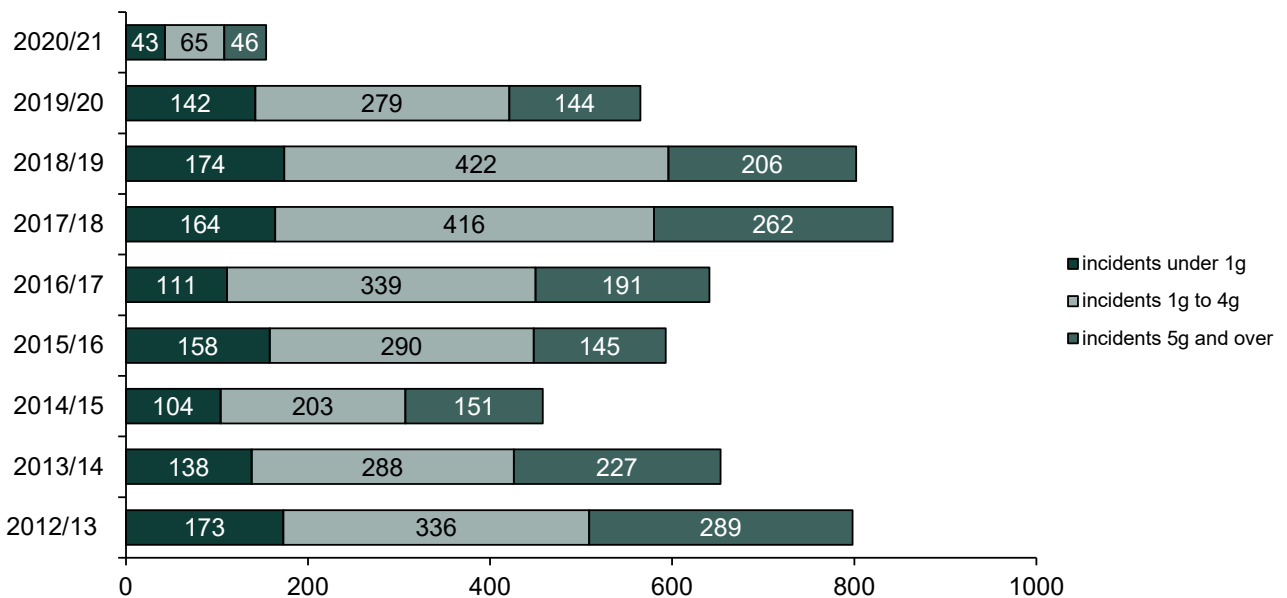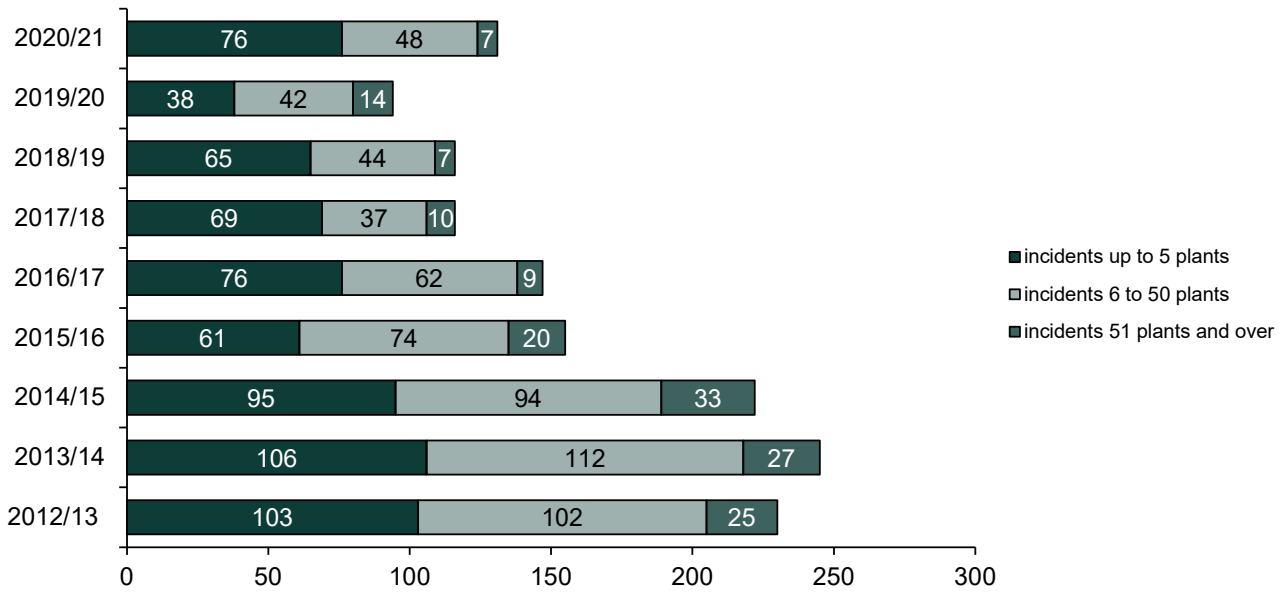| Year	incidents under 1g	incidents 1g to 4g	incidents 5g and over
2020/21	43	65	46
2019/20	142	279	144
2018/19	174	422	206
2017/18	164	416	262
2016/17	111	339	191
2015/16	158	290	145
2014/15	104	203	151
2013/14	138	288	227
2012/13	173	336	289

0   200   400   600   800   1000

Figure 3.14 Number of Class B Cannabis plant seizure incidents by number of plants seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Class B, amphetamines seized (converted amounts)

Amphetamines: Seizures of amphetamines have not shown a consistent trend over the years since 2012/13. A small number of large seizures have contributed to the higher quantities recorded in 2012/13, 2015/16 and 2018/19. In 2012/13 one seizure accounted for 85 per cent of the total, in 2015/16 two seizures accounted for 87 per cent of the total seized and two seizures in 2018/19 accounted for around 75 per cent of the total seized.

Figure 3.15 Quantity of Amphetamines seized (kg), 2012/13 to 2020/21
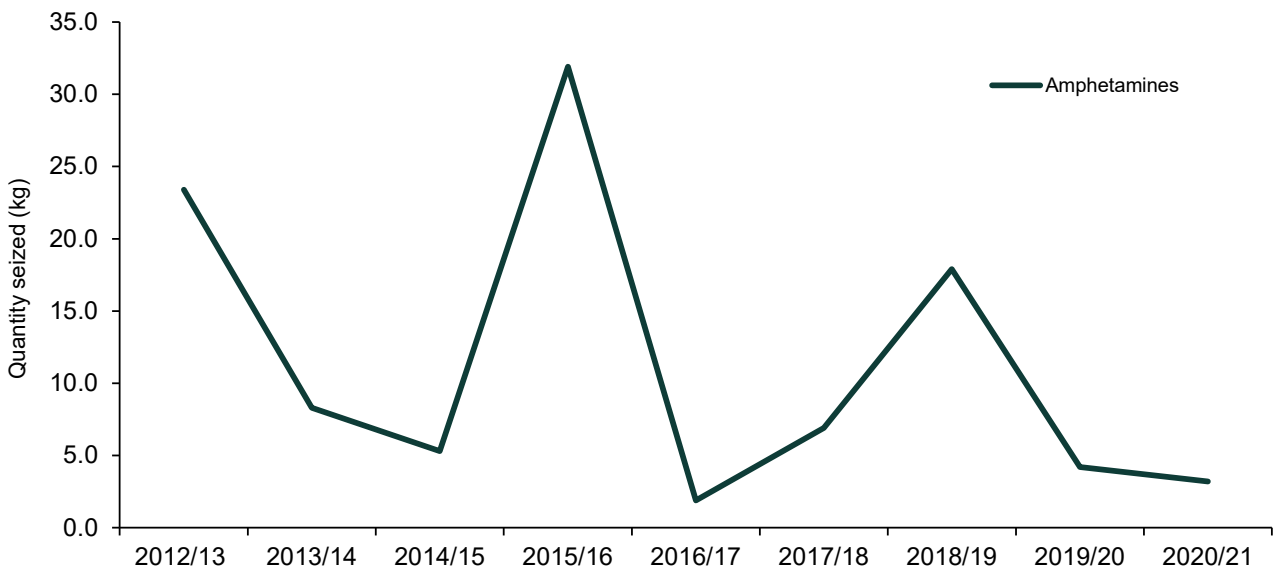
In 2020/21 almost three quarters of amphetamine seizure incidents involved weights less than 10g.

Figure 3.16 presents the distribution of amphetamine seizures since 2012/13, demonstrating the variability of amounts seized.

Figure 3.16 Number of Class B Amphetamine seizure incidents by weight seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21
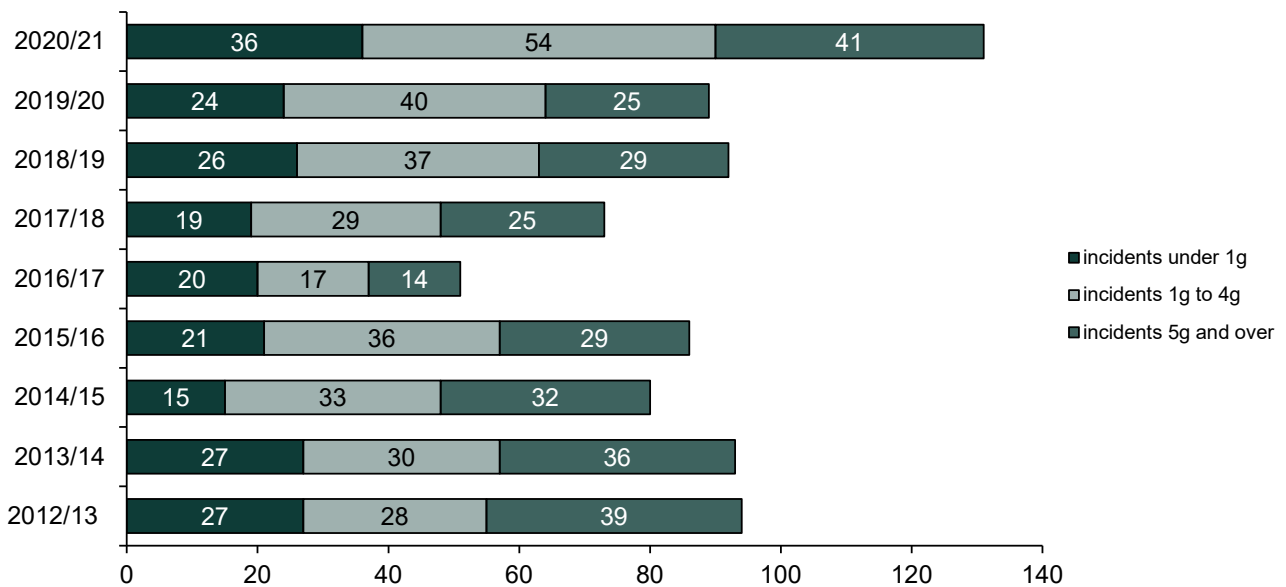
Class C Drugs

Conversion factors have been applied to the following Class C drugs and they are summarised as follows:

Summarised in thousands of doses
Anabolic steroids
Benzodiazepines

Class C, doses seized (converted amounts)

Anabolic Steroids: There were 73,400 doses of anabolic steroids seized in 2013/14, with two seizures accounting for 70 per cent of the total. In 2017/18 there were nearly 80,000 doses seized, with two thirds of this total attributed to one seizure. The number of doses seized in all other years was much lower, with the lowest level of 700 doses seized in 2019/20. There were 5,800 doses seized in 2020/21.

Benzodiazepines: The number of doses of benzodiazepines increased each year from around 90,600 in 2012/13 to 210,700 in 2015/16. Seven seizures accounted for 61 per cent of the total quantity of benzodiazepine seized in 2015/16. Levels generally fell between 2015/16 and 2019/20 when 86,600 doses were seized. This was followed by an increase to 222,100 doses seized in 2020/21, the highest level since 2012/13. Two seizures accounted for 45 per cent of the total quantity of benzodiazepine seized in 2020/21.

Figure 3.17 Quantity of Anabolic Steroids and Benzodiazepines seized (doses,'000s), 2012/13 to 2020/21
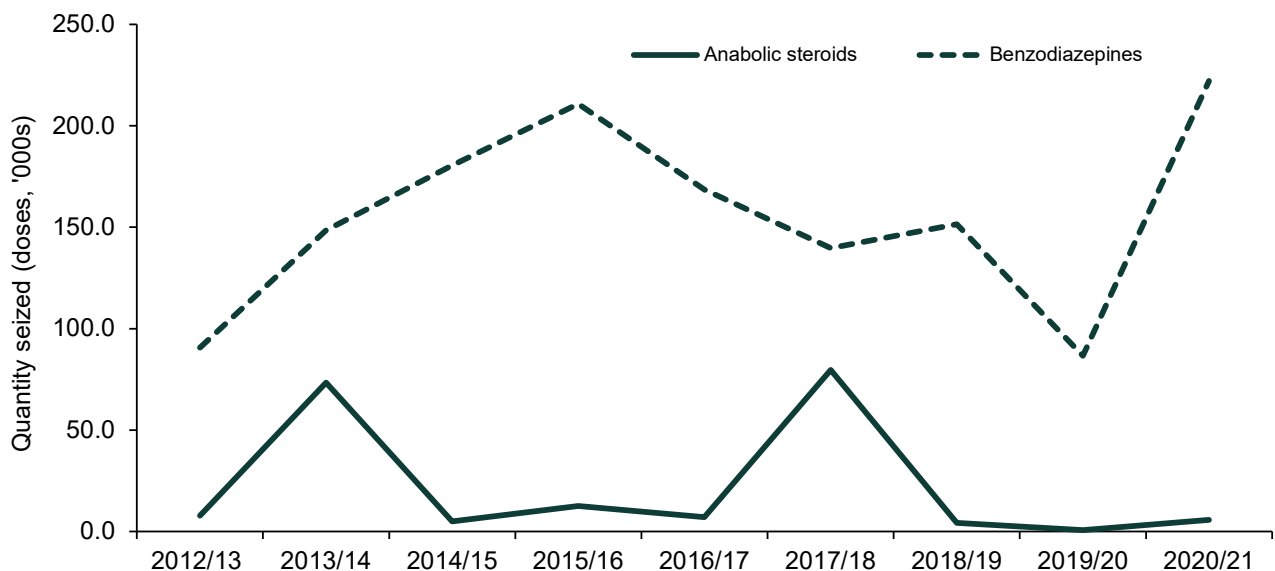
In 2020/21 at least 70 per cent of anabolic steroid and benzodiazepine seizures involved more than 5 doses (Figure 3.18). Figures 3.19 and 3.20 present the distribution of anabolic steroid and benzodiazepine seizures since 2012/13; nearly three quarters of the seizures since this date have involved more than 5 doses.

Figure 3.18 Distribution of the quantities of Benzodiazepine and Anabolic Steroids seized (doses) 2020/21
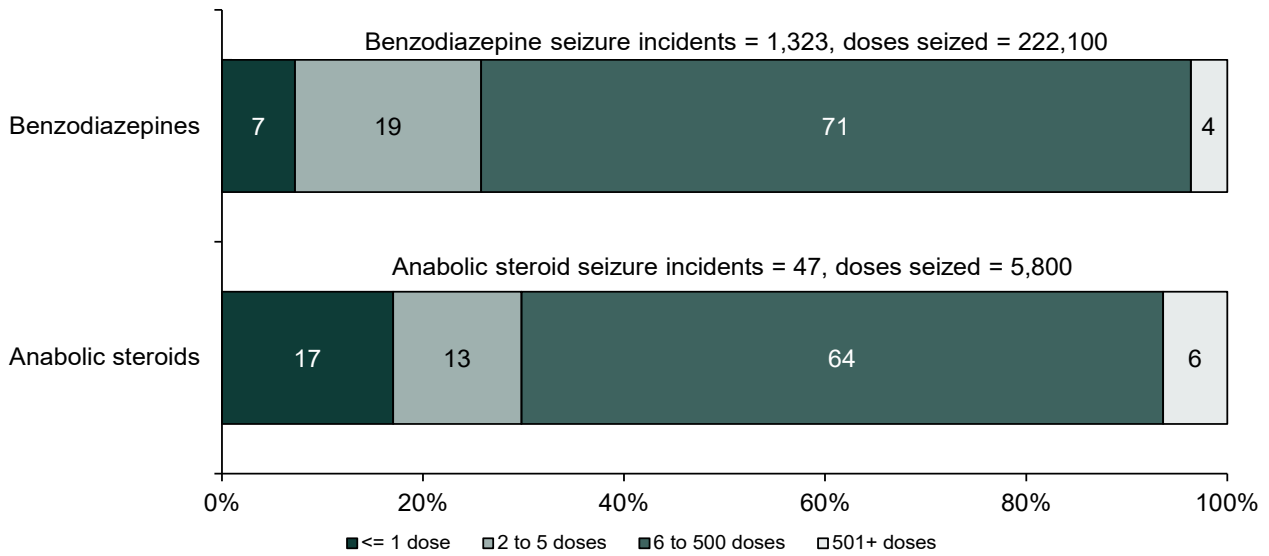
Benzodiazepine seizure incidents = 1,323, doses seized = 222,100

| Benzodiazepines | 7 | 19 | 71 | 4 |

Anabolic steroid seizure incidents = 47, doses seized = 5,800

| Anabolic steroids | 17 | 13 | 64 | 6 |

Legend: ■ <= 1 dose ■ 2 to 5 doses ■ 6 to 500 doses □ 501+ doses

Figure 3.19 Number of Class C Anabolic steroids seizure incidents by doses seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Year	up to 5 doses	6 to 50 doses	51 doses and over
2020/21	14	24	9
2019/20	13	13	7
2018/19	12	19	13
2017/18	5	14	20
2016/17	16	27	12
2015/16	15	24	14
2014/15	17	18	15
2013/14	19	35	22
2012/13	19	36	28

Legend: ■ incidents up to 5 doses ■ incidents 6 to 50 doses ■ incidents 51 doses and over
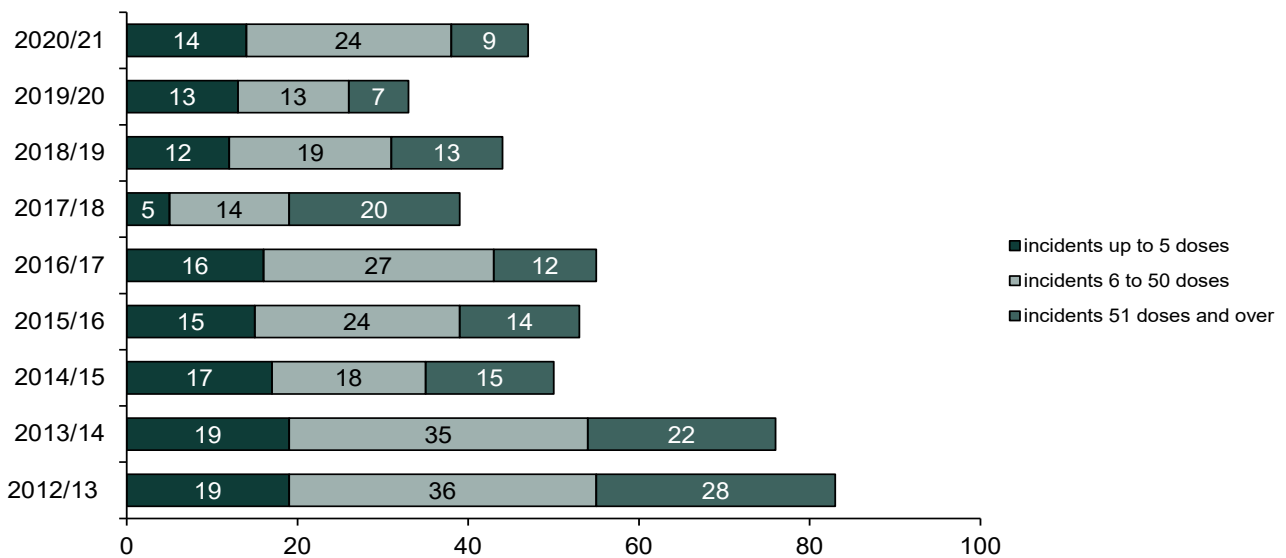
Figure 3.20 Number of Class C Benzodiazepines seizure incidents by doses seized, 2012/13 to 2020/21

Year	up to 5 doses	6 to 50 doses	51 doses and over
2020/21	341	674	308
2019/20	374	599	224
2018/19	312	483	221
2017/18	268	404	173
2016/17	148	250	188
2015/16	143	329	142
2014/15	152	320	184
2013/14	136	237	98
2012/13	160	223	103

Legend: ■ incidents up to 5 doses ■ incidents 6 to 50 doses ■ incidents 51 doses and over
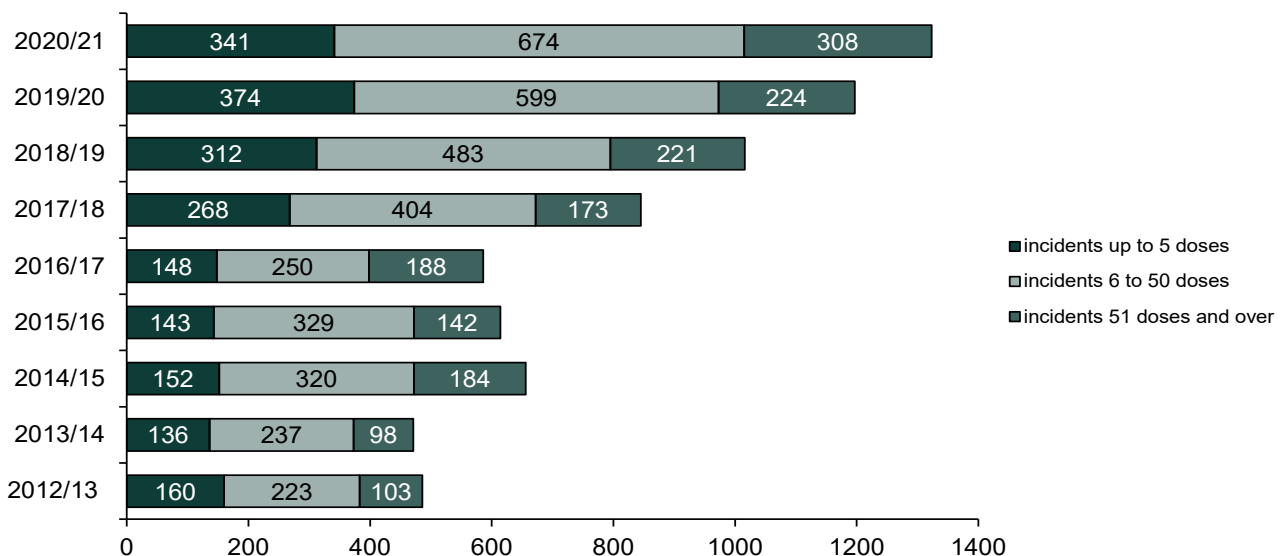
4. Geographic Patterns of Drug Seizures

Drug seizure incidents are allocated to the policing district in which the seizure occurs. The distribution of seizures across policing districts has remained largely unchanged since 2012/13.

In 2020/21 29 per cent of seizure incidents occured in Belfast City Policing District. To assist in understanding the distribution of seizure incidents, a breakdown of Belfast City Policing District into the four local policing teams is available from 2016/17. The four local policing teams are based in Lisburn Road (South Belfast), Tennent Street (North Belfast), Strandtown (East Belfast) and Woodbourne (West Belfast).

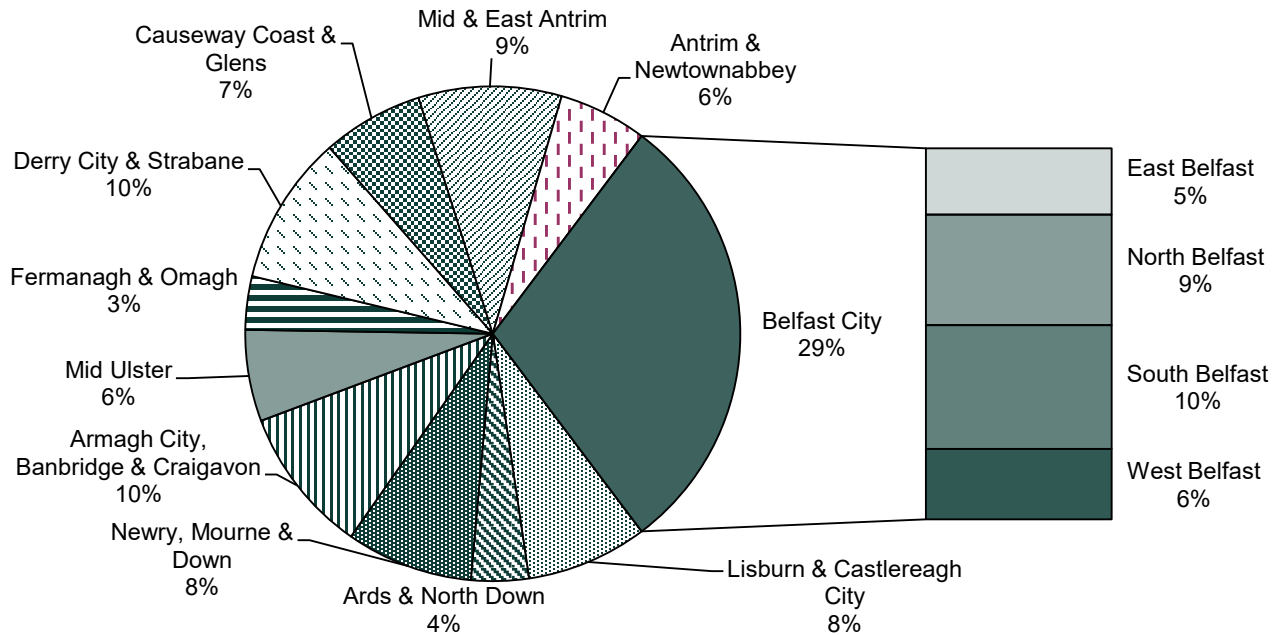**Figure 4.1 Distribution of seizure incidents by policing district, 2020/21**

Table 4.1   Drug seizure incidents by policing district over the last five years[1]

Policing District	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast City	1,718	2,148	2,444	2,644	2,483
East Belfast	*276*	*312*	*387*	*412*	*445*
North Belfast	*496*	*606*	*696*	*692*	*739*
South Belfast	*650*	*863*	*963*	*1,115*	*829*
West Belfast	*296*	*367*	*398*	*425*	*470*
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	435	574	694	603	668
Ards & North Down	371	333	391	407	317
Newry, Mourne, & Down	471	566	586	617	699
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	483	624	721	799	806
Mid Ulster	263	361	403	493	504
Fermanagh & Omagh	297	312	333	322	294
Derry City & Strabane	407	606	593	670	826
Causeway Coast & Glens	375	484	454	490	557
Mid & East Antrim	339	426	466	663	787
Antrim & Newtownabbey	387	438	476	478	487
Northern Ireland	**5,546**	**6,872**	**7,561**	**8,186**	**8,428**

[1] The complete time series from 2012/13 is available in the drug seizures and arrests annual trends spreadsheet, 810KB (opens in a new window).

5. Trends in 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. 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.

Arrests relating to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

The number of drug-related arrests has increased in most of the years since 2006/07 with the exception of a fall of 37 in 2014/15, a fall of 239 in 2016/17 and a fall of 504 in 2020/21. While the number recorded in 2020/21 (3,325) decreased by 13.2 per cent when compared with 2019/20, it is still nearly twice the number recorded in 2006/07 (1,709). 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-related arrests recorded since this date.

Following arrest, further police action may be taken against the arrested person or they may be released with no further action being taken. People may also be dealt with by police without first being arrested.

The rate of increase in drug-related arrests has not kept pace with that seen in drug seizure incidents. The outcome figures for police recorded drug offences can provide some clarity on this.

Each police recorded drug offence can be allocated a crime outcome including those where police have taken action against the person involved, such as charge, summons, caution/informed warning or community resolution notice (CRN).

CRNs were introduced as a crime outcome disposal during 2011/12. In their first year there were 174 CRN outcomes recorded in respect of police recorded drug offences, rising to 2,801 in 2020/21. Since 2017/18 they have represented the highest proportion of crime outcome disposals allocated to drug offences, followed by summons, charge and then caution. With the introduction of community resolutions, the number of caution outcomes allocated to drug offences has fallen.

Figure 5.1 Drug-related arrests, drug seizure incidents and outcomes[10] for police recorded drug offences, 2006/07 to 2020/21, indexed to 2006/07=100
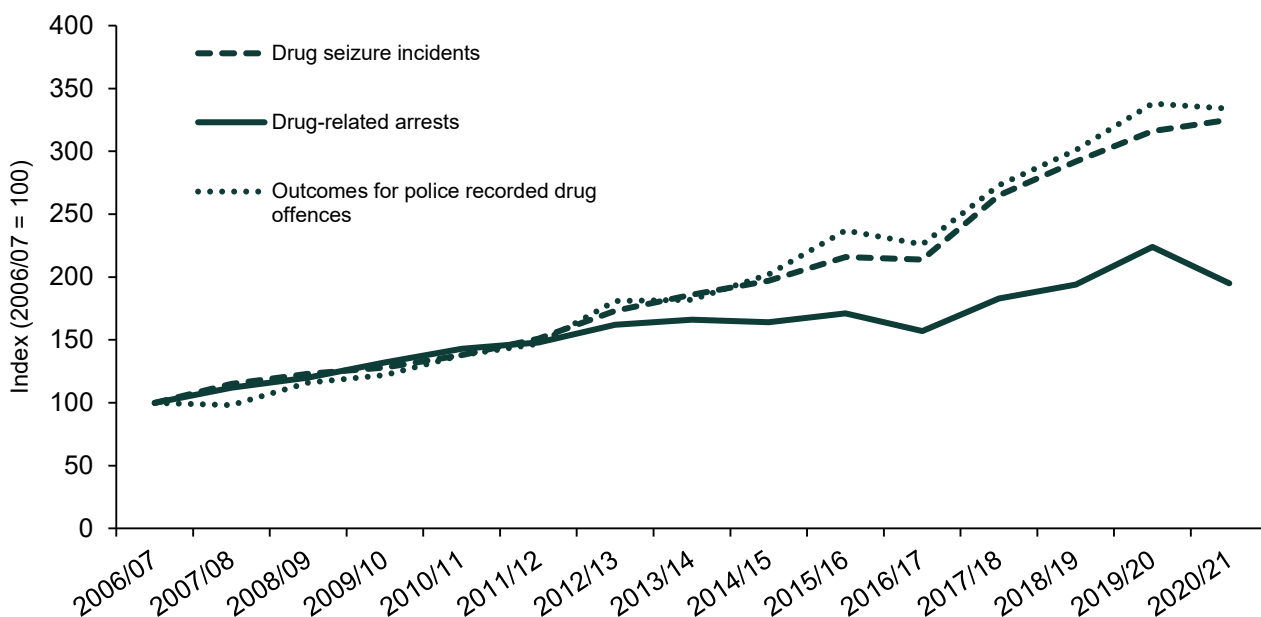
The increase in drug-related arrests is mainly influenced by arrests related to possession offences. Possession-related arrests have more than doubled since 2006/07 (1,500), with 3,144 recorded in 2020/21. Arrests involving supply offences have nearly doubled, increasing from 705 in 2006/07 to 1,202 in 2020/21. Arrests involving other drug-related offences (not supply or possession) are small in number.

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[10] Outcomes for police recorded drug offences include charge, summons, caution and community resolution. Community resolutions were introduced as a crime outcome disposal during 2011/12.

Figure 5.2 Drug-related arrests by type of arrest offence[11], 2006/07 to 2020/21
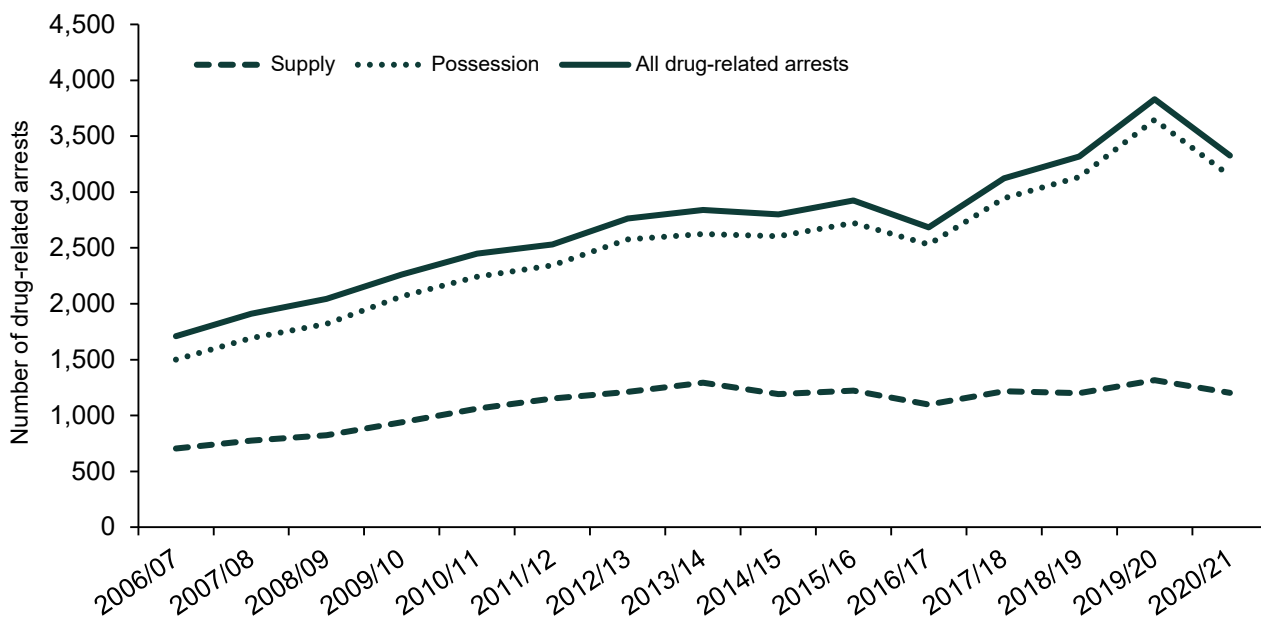
The number of arrests for a drug-related offence where the person was under 18 at time of arrest saw a drop in 2020/21 to a level of 114. This was nearly half the level recorded in 2019/20 (210). As the number of drug-related arrests has increased, the proportion of those who were under 18 at time of arrest has fallen. Drug-related arrests where the person was 18 or over at time of arrest have more than doubled since 2006/07 (1,523), with 3,211 recorded in 2020/21.

Figure 5.3 Drug-related arrests by age at time of arrest, 2006/07 to 2020/21
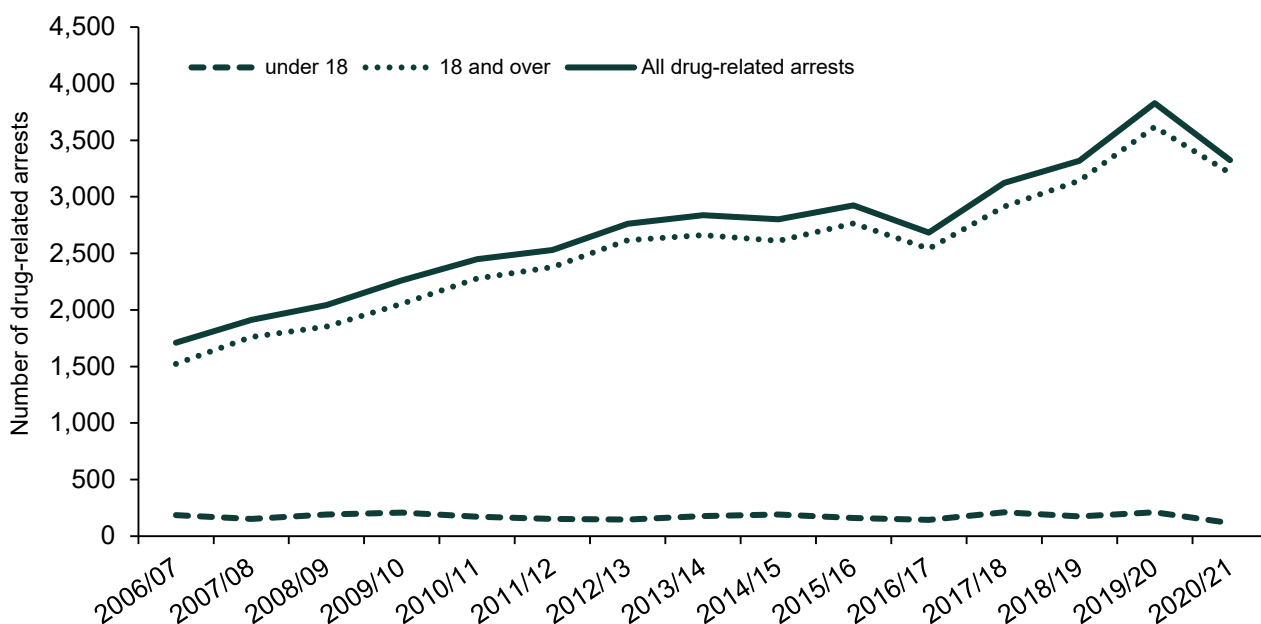
Arrests under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016

There have been 38 arrests under the Psychoactive Substances Act between the introduction of the legislation in 2016 and the latest financial year 2020/21. There were 11 arrests in 2016/17, 10 in 2017/18, 4 in 2018/19, 4 in 2019/20 and 9 in 2020/21. Nearly two fifths of the arrests (15 of the 38) have occurred in the Belfast City policing district.

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[11] As a person can be arrested for more than one type of drug offence, arrest figures by type of arrest offence will sum to more than the total number of drug-related arrests. The number of arrests for 'Other' drug offences are too small to be presented in Figure 5.2.

6. Geographic patterns of Drug-related Arrests

Drug-related arrests are allocated to the policing district in which the person was arrested.

Thirty-six per cent of drug-related arrests occurred in Belfast City Policing District in 2020/21. To assist in understanding the distribution of drug-related arrests, a breakdown of Belfast City Policing District into the four local policing teams is presented in this section. The four local policing teams are based in Lisburn Road (South Belfast), Tennent Street (North Belfast), Strandtown (East Belfast) and Woodbourne (West Belfast).

Drug-related arrests in Belfast City policing district have increased in most years since 2006/07, with the highest level recorded in 2019/20. Derry City & Strabane saw their highest drug-related arrest levels in 2020/21.

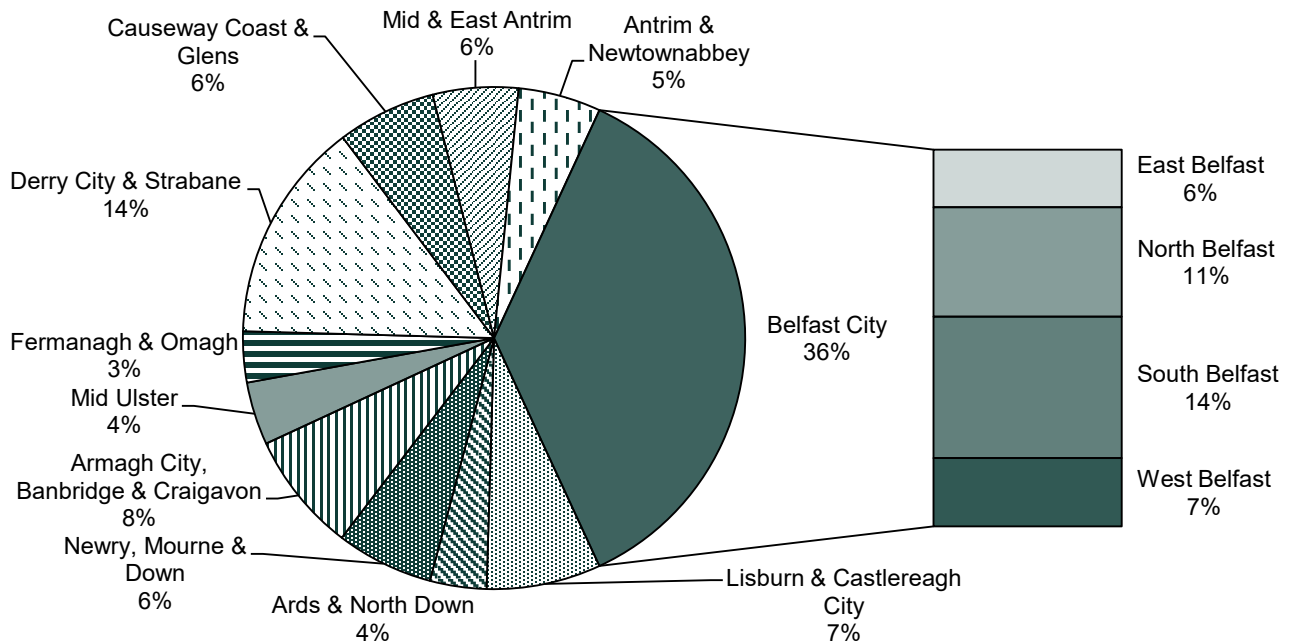**Figure 6.1 Distribution of drug-related arrests by policing district, 2020/21**

Table 6.1   Drug-related arrests by policing district over the last five years[1]

Policing District	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Belfast City	918	1,080	1,320	1,541	1,204
East Belfast	*155*	*160*	*188*	*186*	*184*
North Belfast	*246*	*293*	*359*	*403*	*350*
South Belfast	*360*	*484*	*564*	*736*	*452*
West Belfast	*157*	*143*	*209*	*216*	*218*
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	218	230	248	278	245
Ards & North Down	124	137	153	150	121
Newry, Mourne, & Down	168	188	187	176	208
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	233	229	260	280	257
Mid Ulster	97	119	143	185	135
Fermanagh & Omagh	168	181	140	150	109
Derry City & Strabane	277	395	332	430	475
Causeway Coast & Glens	192	218	204	233	211
Mid & East Antrim	135	154	167	213	183
Antrim & Newtownabbey	155	191	164	193	177
Northern Ireland	**2,685**	**3,122**	**3,318**	**3,829**	**3,325**

[1] The complete time series from 2012/13 is available in the drug seizures and arrests annual trends spreadsheet, 810KB (opens in a new window).

7. Wider Context (Comparison with England and Wales)[13] [12]

Figure 7.1 below provides a comparison of trends in drug seizure incidents in Northern Ireland compared with those in England and Wales. As the number of seizures in England and Wales far exceed those recorded in Northern Ireland, the trends are shown relative to the levels recorded in 2006/07. Border Force seizures have been excluded from the England and Wales total.

While the trends were similar between 2006/07 and 2008/09, they started to diverge in 2009/10 with an increasing trend observed in Northern Ireland and a falling trend in England and Wales. The trend in England & Wales started to increase again in 2018/19.

Figure 1.2 (Section 1 Overview) shows how closely the drug seizures trend follows the police recorded drug offences trend in Northern Ireland. It should be noted that the same is also observed in England and Wales[13].

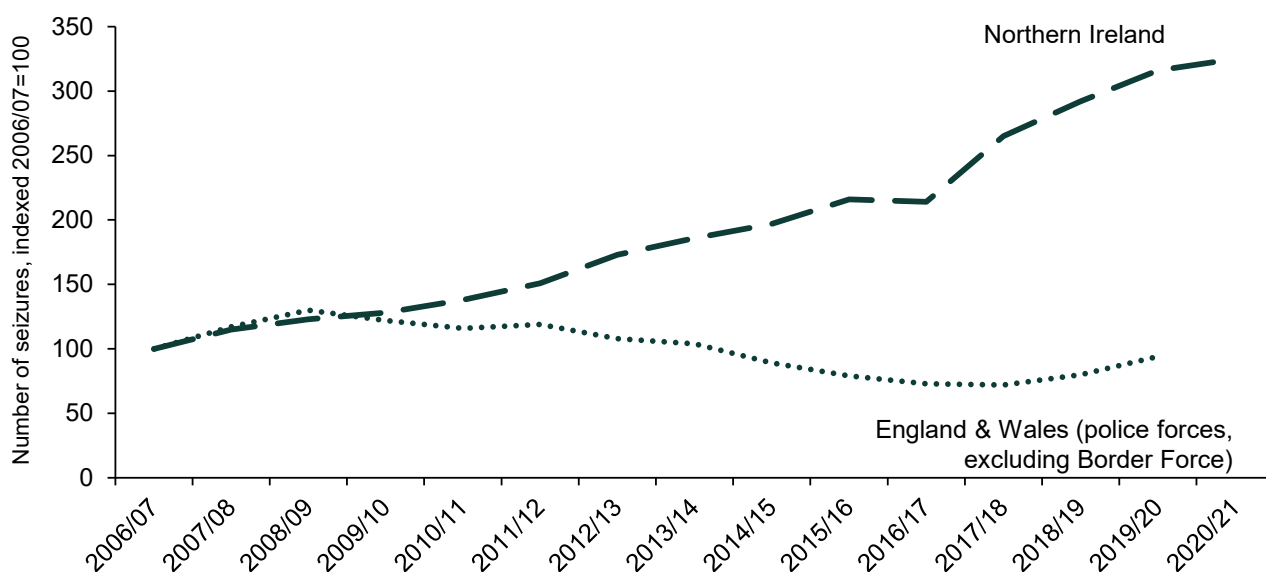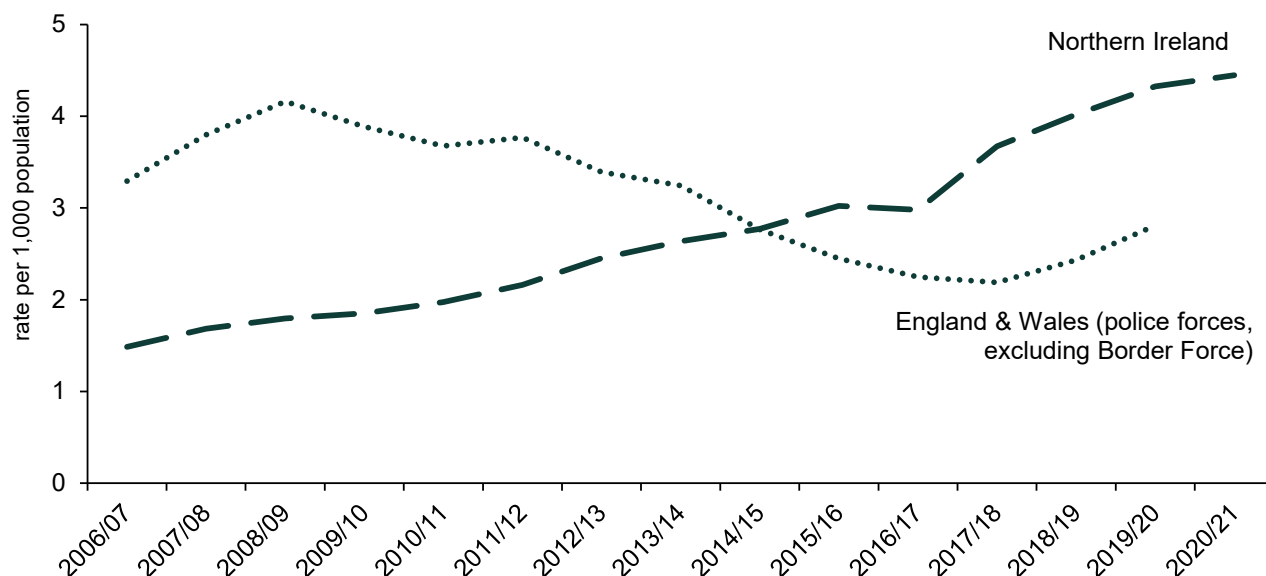**Figure 7.1 Drug seizures in Northern Ireland compared with England and Wales (index 2006/07=100)**

Figure 7.2 Drug seizures per 1,000 population in Northern Ireland compared with England and Wales

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[12] The England & Wales details have been sourced from the publication Seizures of drugs in England and Wales, financial year ending 2020 (opens in a new window). At time of publication these were the most up-to-date figures available for England & Wales.

[13] Seizures of drugs in England and Wales, financial year ending 2020 (opens in a new window), Figure 2.2.

Appendix 1. Background and Data Quality

1   Methodology

1.1 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 PSNIs 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.

1.2 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 Drug Seizures and Arrests User Guide PDF (333KB) (opens in a new window).

2   Further Information

2.1 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.

2.2 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. The number of seizure incidents involving new psychoactive substances is available from 2017/18.

Previously published annual reports for the financial years dating back to 2000/01 are available in the drug seizure statistics archive (opens in a new window) on the PSNI website. Caution should be taken when looking at previously published reports as there will have been changes in drug classifications and categories and improvements in recording practices and systems over time.

2.3 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 excel spreadsheet format (opens in a new window) format and open document spreadsheet format (opens in a new window).

2.4 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).