

Management Information

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Suspected drug deaths in Scotland: October to December 2024

1. Background

The Scottish Government has a National Mission to reduce drug deaths and improve the lives of those affected by drugs. This quarterly report presents Police Scotland management information to provide an indication of current trends in suspected drug deaths in Scotland.

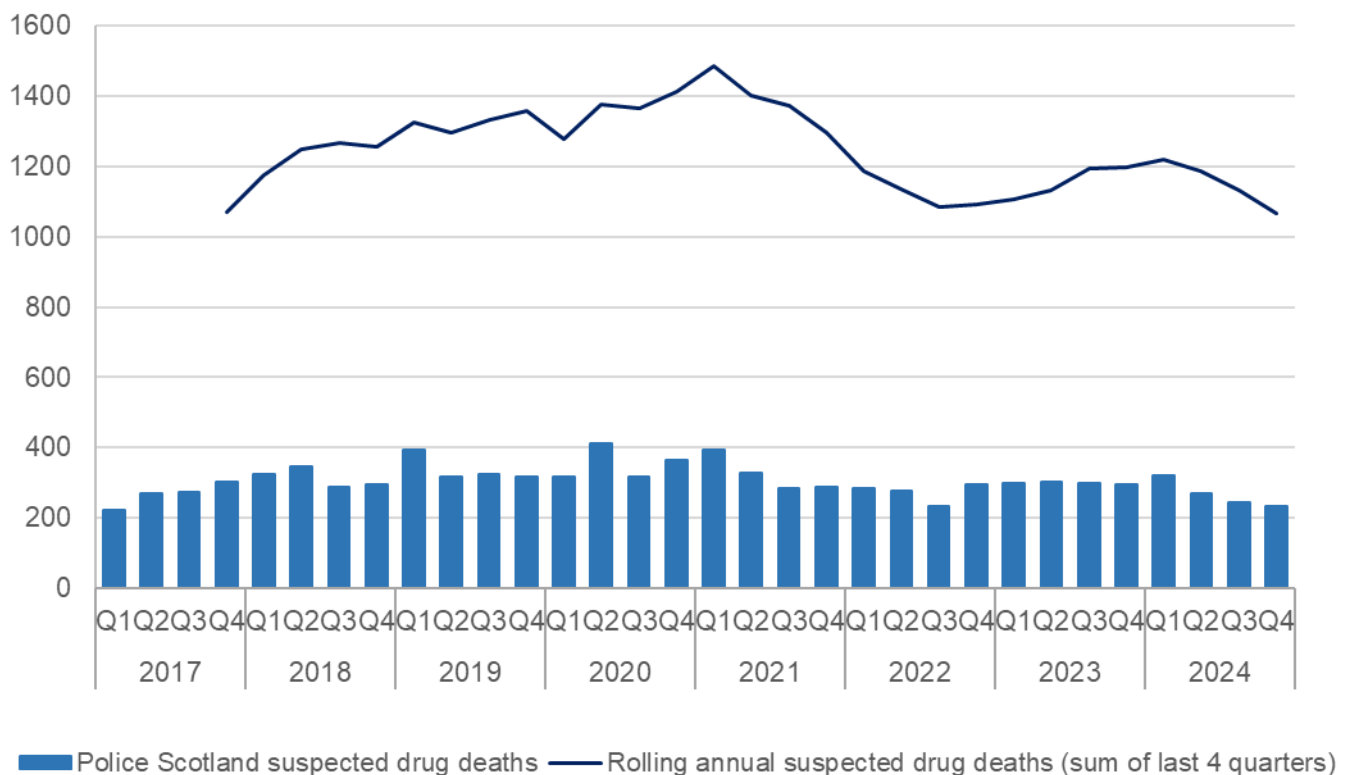
2. Summary

There were 1,065 suspected drug deaths in 2024. This was 11% (132) fewer than in 2023 (1,197). Suspected drug deaths in Scotland have fallen over recent quarters but remain at a high level.

3. Main points

Figure 1: Suspected drug deaths have fallen over recent quarters but remain at a high level

Number of Police Scotland suspected drug deaths by quarter and year, January 2017 to December 2024



Note: Q1 is January to March, Q2 is April to June, Q3 is July to September, Q4 is October to December. Source: Police Scotland.

During 2024:

- There were 1,065 suspected drug deaths, 11% (132) fewer than in 2023.
- Males accounted for 74% of suspected drug deaths. This is broadly in line with previous periods.
- There were 280 suspected drug deaths of females, a decrease of 13% (42) compared to 2023.
- A majority (64%) of suspected drug deaths were of people aged between 35 and 54 years. This is broadly in line with previous periods.
- There were 34 suspected drug deaths in the under 25 age group, 37% (20) fewer than in 2023.

- The Police Divisions with the greatest number of suspected drug deaths were: Greater Glasgow (236), Lanarkshire (127) and Edinburgh City (92).

For quarter 4, October to December 2024:

- There were 232 suspected drug deaths recorded, 5% (12) fewer than between July to September 2024 (244), and 22% (65) fewer than the same calendar quarter in the previous year (October to December 2023; 297).
- This is one of the lowest numbers of suspected drug deaths recorded in a single calendar quarter since the start of the time series in 2017.

Note that numbers of suspected drug deaths fluctuate from quarter to quarter. Care should be taken not to interpret movements between individual calendar quarters as indicative of any long term trend.

More detail on the statistics presented above is available in the workbook presented alongside this [report](#).

4. Methodology

The data in this report is operational information from Police Scotland who compile figures on the basis of reports from police officers attending scenes of death. This is management information and not subject to the same level of validation and quality assurance as Official Statistics. Accredited official statistics on drug deaths in Scotland are published annually by [National Records of Scotland](#).

More information on definitions, data sources, methodology and interpretation of the data, including the historical relationship between suspected drug death figures and drug misuse death statistics, can be found in the Methodology Annex.

5. Next update

Public Health Scotland (PHS) compile a [Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response \(RADAR\) Quarterly report](#) of drug-related indicators in order to inform action to prevent drug harms and deaths. This includes weekly data on suspected drug deaths from Police Scotland. The next PHS RADAR Quarterly Report is due for release in April 2025.

The next 'Suspected drug deaths in Scotland' report covering deaths to March 2025 will be published in June 2025.

The next annual drug misuse deaths Accredited Official Statistics publication from NRS is due to be released in Summer 2025.

6. Accessing help and support for problem drug use

If you or anyone you know is affected by drug use, support is available via the following organisations:

- [Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs](#)
- [Know the Score](#)
- [With You](#)
- [Scottish Drug Services Directory](#)

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Scottish Government welcomes feedback and suggestions on statistical products - please contact statistics.enquiries@gov.scot to share your views.

Suspected drug deaths in Scotland: Methodology

Annex

a. Sources of drug deaths information in Scotland

Classifying a death as drug-related is complex. There are a number of different definitions of drug death, and two different sets of statistics on the number of drug deaths used in Scotland.

i. National Statistics published annually by National Records of Scotland (NRS)

These are the official figures on the number of drug misuse deaths registered in Scotland each year. Drug misuse deaths are identified using data from death registration records supplemented with information from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and forensic pathologists. It covers all deaths with an underlying cause of drug poisoning or drug abuse, but only where any of the substances involved are controlled in the UK. This means that deaths from only e.g. paracetamol or antidepressants are excluded.

Figure 2: Number of drug misuse deaths registered in Scotland, 1996 to 2023



Source: National Records of Scotland

NRS's National Statistics publication [Drug-related deaths in Scotland](#) uses this definition, with the most recent release (August 2024) reporting 1,172 drug misuse deaths for 2023. This was an increase of 121 deaths (12%) compared with 2022 (Figure 1).

ii. Police Scotland quarterly suspected drug deaths

This data is sourced from management information from Police Scotland who compile figures on the basis of reports from police officers attending scenes of death. Classification as a suspected drug death is based on an officer's observations and initial enquiries at the scene of death. Police Scotland record information based on the Ministerial Drugs Task Force definition of a drug-related death, given in their 1994 report.

Police Scotland monitor suspected drug deaths to inform prevention and enforcement activity. In order to provide a consistent count over time, all deaths originally classified as a 'suspected drug death' are included here, irrespective of their eventual final categorisation of cause of death.

Police Scotland record a suspected drug death against the date on which the death was declared by a qualified medical expert. To give consistent time periods for comparison purposes, an adjustment of ten days (the median delay between the date of death and date of registration over the last five years) has been made when calculating the number of suspected drug deaths in a calendar year quarter. National Records of Scotland statistics use the date of registration of death.

Police Scotland consider the relevant circumstances which relate to all sudden and unexplained deaths. This informs Police Scotland's subsequent investigation and the official recording of the death as a suspected drug death. Police Scotland records the location of a suspected drug death using the division of where the death occurred, unless the person has been conveyed to a hospital in another division, in which case the death would be recorded as the location where they were found. Each of these locations will be in one of Police Scotland's thirteen territorial divisional boundaries.

Data validation is conducted by Police Scotland divisional drug death data controllers who confirm and cross-reference detail from the Police Scotland death report with subsequent pathology and toxicology reports.

b. Use of Management Information from Police Scotland

The Police Scotland data presented here is Management Information (MI) and *should not be considered as official Police Scotland statistics*. MI is information that is based on administrative data used for operational purposes. It is used in the normal course of business to inform operational activity, prevention and enforcement activity. Whilst any data used goes through a process of quality assurance, MI is not always subject to the same level of validation and checking as Official Statistics.

However, if used appropriately and with an awareness of the associated caveats, MI can still provide, in some instances, useful insight and intelligence to help inform the public and aid decision making and the development of policy and interventions.

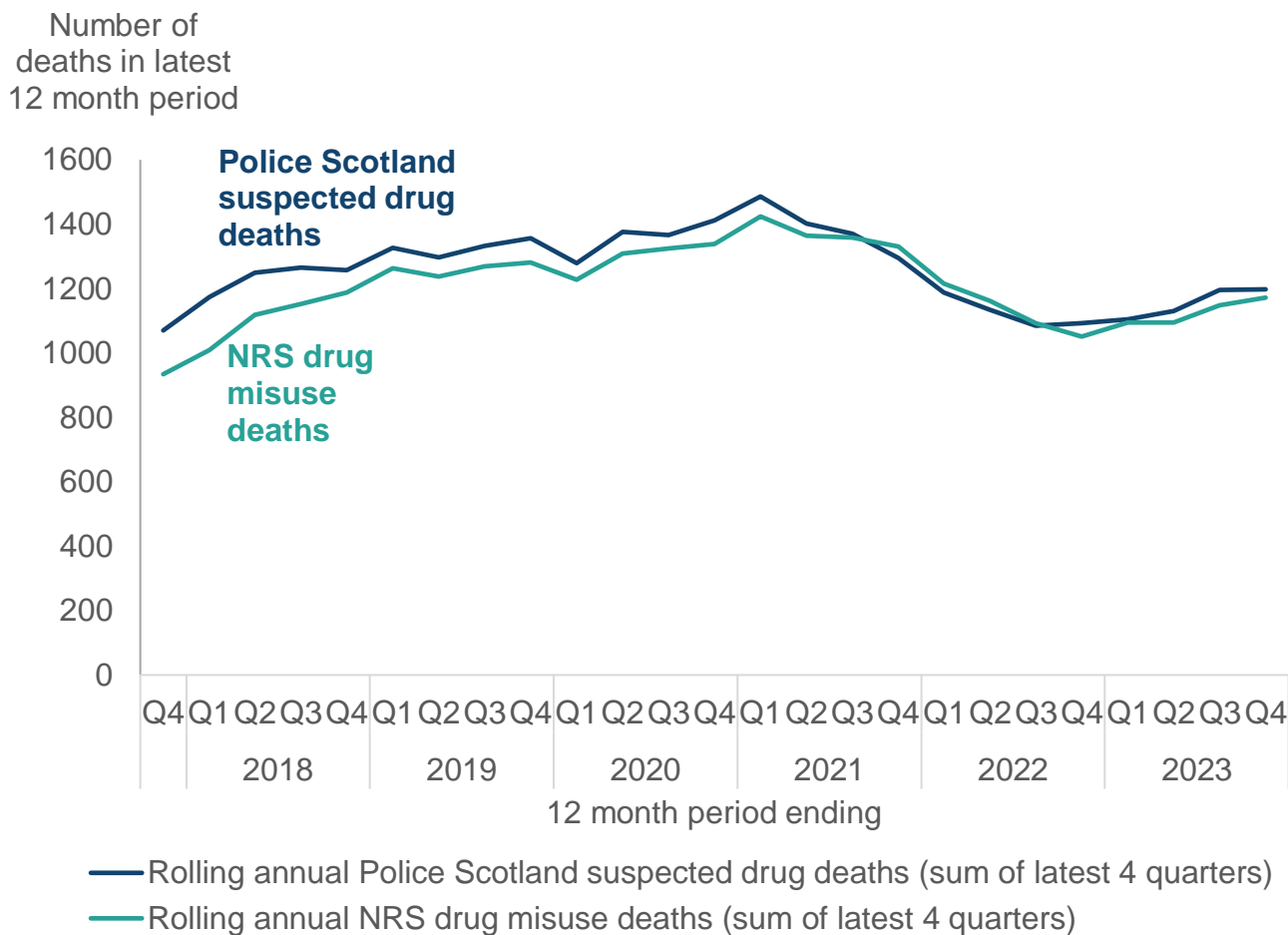
For this publication, the Scottish Government and Police Scotland have agreed that, subject to the caveats on MI described above, it is appropriate to publish the Police

Scotland MI data on suspected drug deaths as part of improving the data and information available on current trends in drug deaths in Scotland.

c. Relationship between Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug misuse deaths

Police Scotland suspected drug deaths correlate very closely with the NRS drug misuse death statistics. Figure 3 shows that since the period ending in December 2018, the rolling 12-month Police Scotland figures have ranged from 3% below to 6% above the NRS drug misuse death figures.

Figure 3: Comparison of NRS drug misuse deaths and Police Scotland suspected drug deaths, October 2017 - December 2023



Source: National Records of Scotland and Police Scotland

Note: Q1 is January to March, Q2 is April to June, Q3 is July to September, Q4 is October to December. Source: National Records of Scotland and Police Scotland.

Table 1 below shows how these measures have compared on a calendar-year basis between 2018 and 2023.

Table 1: Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug misuse deaths, 2018 to 2023

Measure	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Police Scotland suspected drug deaths	1,257	1,356	1,411	1,295	1,092	1,197
NRS drug misuse deaths	1,187	1,280	1,339	1,330	1,051	1,172
Percentage difference between Police Scotland and NRS figures	6%	6%	5%	-3%	4%	2%

Source: National Records of Scotland and Police Scotland

d. Other drug death data and resources

- [Drug misuse deaths in Scotland in 2023 \(National Records of Scotland\)](#)
- [Rapid Action Drug Alerts and Response \(RADAR\) quarterly report \(Public Health Scotland\)](#)
- [ScotPHO drugs pages \(Scottish Public Health Observatory\)](#)
- [Homeless deaths \(National Records of Scotland\)](#)
- [UK drug situation: Focal Point annual report](#)



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