

CASE PROCESSING TIME FOR CRIMINAL CASES DEALT WITH AT COURTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, 2019/20

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Summary Findings

1.1 Context

This bulletin presents data on the average¹ Case Processing Time for Criminal Cases dealt with in the Crown and magistrates' courts in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020 and refers to the time from which the offence was reported to, or detected by, the police.

1.2 Summary

- In general, the overall picture is that the time taken for cases to be completed has shown an improvement from that recorded in the last few years. While change in time taken for the completion of charge cases in relation to 2019/20 varied according to court type, the decrease in processing times for cases dealt with by way of summons showed a consistent improvement for all court types.

1.3 All Courts

- The median time taken for cases to be dealt with at court is being used as an indicator for the Draft Programme for Government. In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with, at **all courts**, was 149 days. This is a decrease of 10.8% from the previous year (167 days) and is the second lowest figure recorded in the last five years, though higher than the figure of 143 days recorded in 2014/15, the baseline year for this indicator under the Draft Programme for Government.

1.4 Crown Court

- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **charge cases dealt with at Crown Court**, was 410 days. This is a decrease of 1.4% from the median of 416 days taken in the previous year.
- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **summons cases dealt with at Crown Court**, was 861 days. This is a decrease of 0.6% from the median of 866 days taken in the previous year.

1. Average is measured as the median number of days taken, i.e., the number of days at which 50% of cases have been completed.

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Summary Findings

1.5 Adult Magistrates' Courts

- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **charge cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts**, was 72 days. This is an increase of 2.9% from the median of 70 days taken in 2018/19.
- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **summons cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts**, was 178 days. This is a decrease of 11.4% from the median of 201 days taken in 2018/19 and is the lowest median value recorded for this type of case in the last five years.

1.6 Youth Magistrates' Courts

- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **charge cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts**, was 117 days. This is an increase of 2.6% from the median of 114 days taken in 2018/19.
- In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, in relation to **summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts**, was 242 days. This is a decrease of 8.7% from the median of 265 days taken in 2018/19.

1.7 Processing Times by Offence Category

- In 2019/20, the median time taken to complete cases where the main offence was a motoring one was 119 days, compared to a median time of 698 days taken for cases where the main offence was in the sexual offences category.

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Introduction

2.1 Context

The efficiency of the criminal justice system is important for victims and witnesses, and their families and communities, in terms of building confidence, as well as demonstrating legitimacy of the rule of law. Additionally, early resolution of cases can also help offenders understand the implications of their actions. Furthermore, the timely completion of cases, proportionate with the principles of a fair and just process, contributes to delivery of an effective and efficient justice system.

Speeding up the criminal justice system has been a priority for the Department of Justice (DoJ) since the devolution of responsibility for policing and justice in April 2010 and improving the efficiency of the justice system has been included as a priority under Outcome 7, (Indicator 38) ('We have a safe community where we respect the law, and each other') of the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Programme for Government.



2.2 About this Report

This bulletin presents data on the average case processing time for criminal cases dealt with in the Crown and magistrates' courts in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. The intention of the publication is to show the impact on performance over time of key 'speeding up justice' initiatives put in place through law reform and through administrative and practice improvements. It aims to provide an overview of the time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date that case began its journey through the criminal justice system, based on a start point of the date the offence was reported to, or detected by, the police. Analysis is also provided in relation to case type, i.e., whether it was a charge or summons case, and in relation to the type of court in which the case was dealt with, i.e., Crown Court, adult magistrates' courts or youth magistrates' courts. Findings for the 2019/20 year have been compared with those for cases dealt with in the last four years, for context. The bulletin, published annually, is an update on the one for 2018/19, which was published in September 2019.

The data upon which the publication is based are used to inform policy decisions within the DoJ, as well as to inform requests from other Government organisations, Indicator 38 under Outcome 7 of the draft Programme for Government, answers to NI Assembly questions and queries from the general public.

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Findings

3.1 Overview

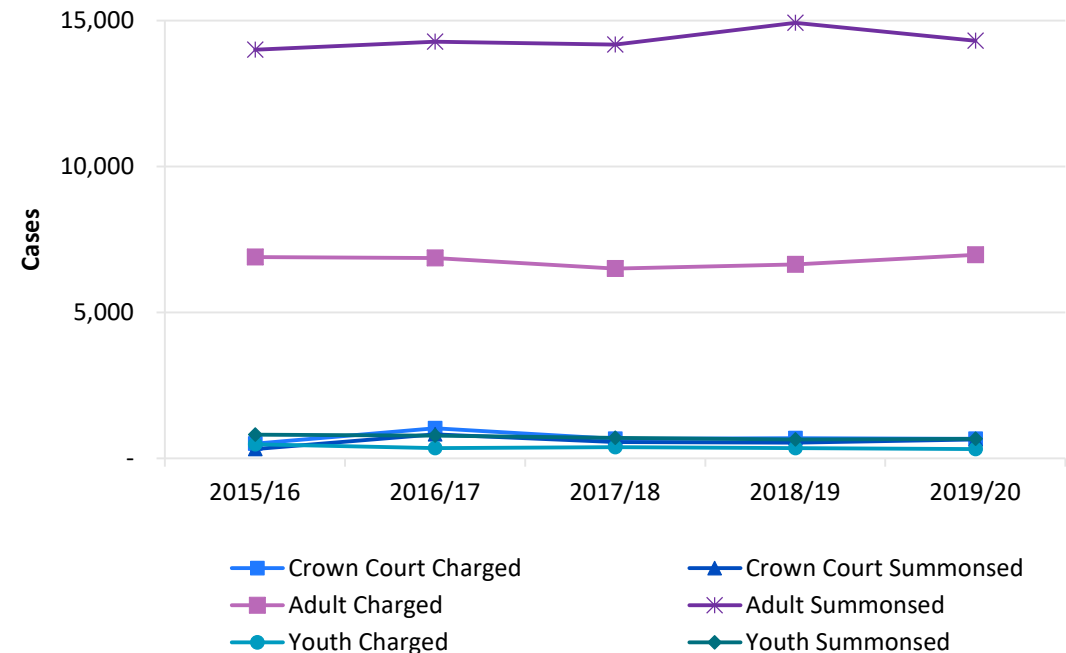
There are two types of courts examined in this publication - the Crown Court and magistrates' courts (both adult and youth) - which have separate remits and hear particular types of cases. Generally speaking, the Crown Court hears more serious, high-level and complex cases and magistrates' courts hear lower level cases. The division between the two primarily reflects the complexity of the cases heard and the potential length of sentence which may be imposed. Consequently, the time taken for a case in the Crown Court is often longer than that seen in the magistrates' courts. This is examined later in this bulletin.

3.2 Number of Cases

The count of cases included in calculations in this bulletin relates only to those specified in the counting rules outlined in the methodological section of Appendix 2 of this bulletin. In summary, they include cases prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) on behalf of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) which were resolved at court and did not result in an out of court disposal; less those resulting from a breach of a previous court order; and, where there was complete relevant information available.

In 2019/20, the number of overall cases completed (which were included in the dataset) was 23,585, a decrease of 0.9% from the total of 23,793 cases in 2018/19, though the completion of cases was affected at the end of the period in question by the introduction of the lockdown associated with the covid-19 pandemic on 23 March 2020. At Crown Court, there were 1,308 cases completed, a 6.6% increase on the total completed in 2018/19, and the figure is the second highest recorded in the last five years.

Figure 1a: Number of Included Cases by Court Type, 2015/16 – 2019/20



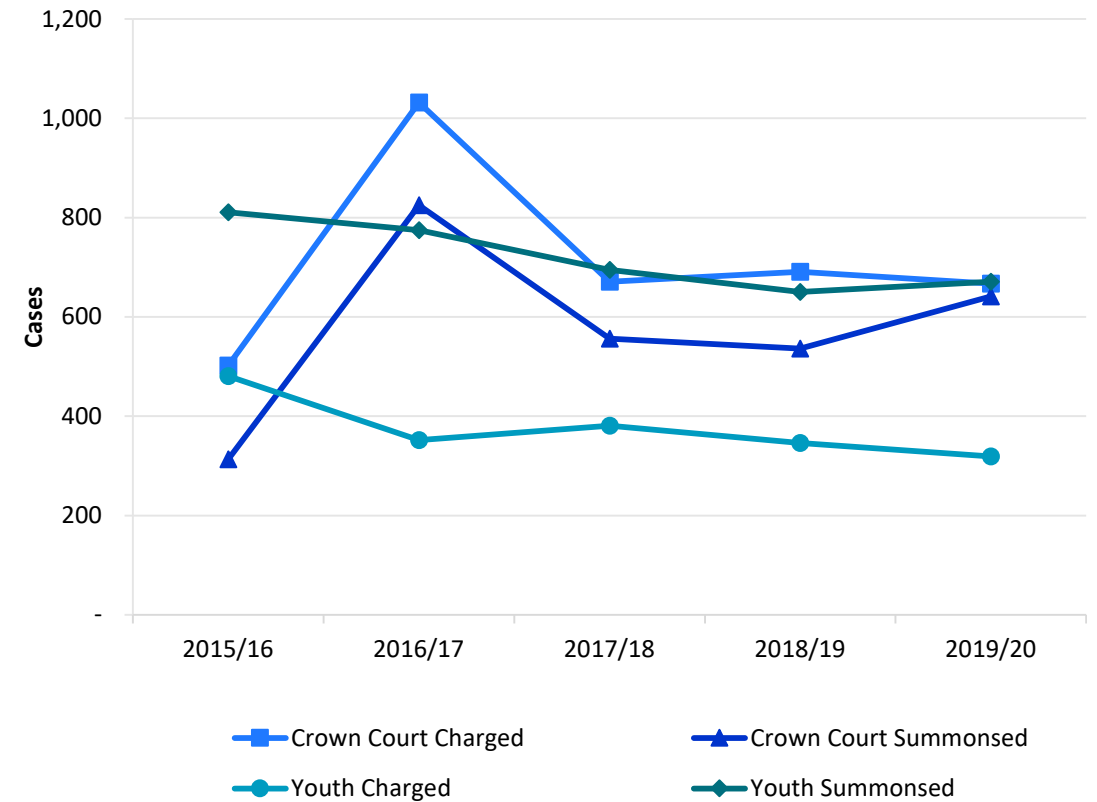
3

Findings

In 2019/20, the number of charge cases completed at adult magistrates' courts, at 6,971 cases, was an increase of 5.0% from the 6,641 cases completed in 2018/19. The number of summons cases completed at adult magistrates' courts in 2019/20, was 14,316, a fall of 4.1% from the 14,929 cases included in the dataset in 2018/19, though still the second highest total recorded in the last five years.

At 319, the number of charge cases at youth magistrates' courts in 2019/20 which were included in the dataset was 7.8% less than the 346 cases included in the dataset in 2018/19 and is the lowest total recorded for this type of case in the last 5 years. The number of summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts, at 671, increased by 3.2% from the figure of 650 cases of this type included in the dataset in 2018/19. This most recent figure is the second lowest in the last 5 years for this type of case (Figures 1a and 1b, Appendix 1, Tables 1 - 7).

Figure 1b: Number of Included Crown Court and Youth Magistrates' Courts Cases by Court Type, 2015/16 – 2019/20



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Findings

3.3 All Cases – Time Taken

Some complex cases take a long time to complete and, because of this, it is useful to show not just an average processing time, but the time taken to process the bulk of cases. In this report, the length of time in which 80% and 90% of cases are completed is also reported.

In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date the offence was reported, in relation to all courts (indicator 38 under the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Programme for Government), was 149 days. This is a decrease of 10.8% from the median of 167 days taken in 2018/19 and is the second lowest median time figure recorded in the last 5 years. It was 4.2% higher than the figure of 143 days recorded in 2014/15, the baseline year for this indicator under the draft Programme for Government.

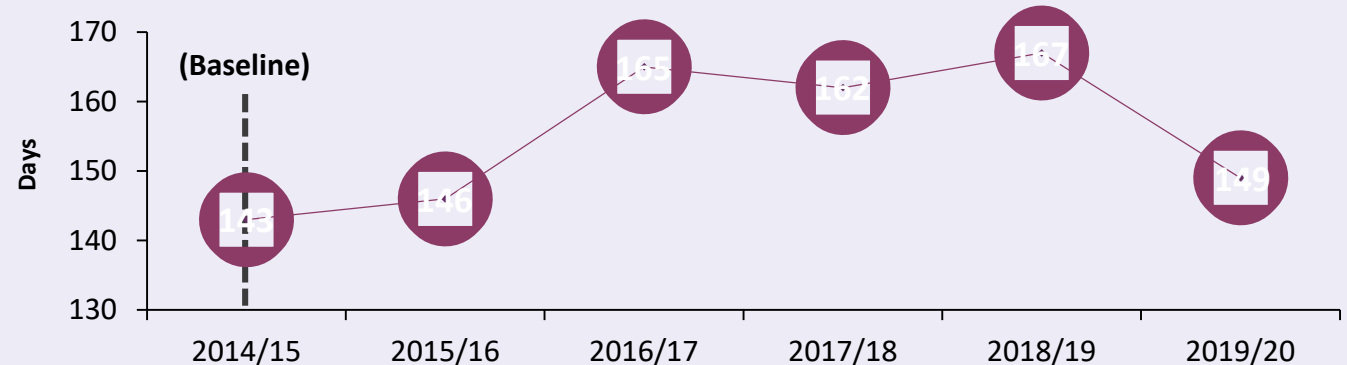
Draft Programme for Government

Outcome 7: We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other

Indicator 38: Median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court

This report provides the latest figure for the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court, which is a population indicator included within the draft Programme for Government. Comparisons are drawn against the baseline, the median time taken in 2014/15.

Latest position: The 2019/20 figure (149 days) marks a 4.2% increase from the baseline figure of 143 days.

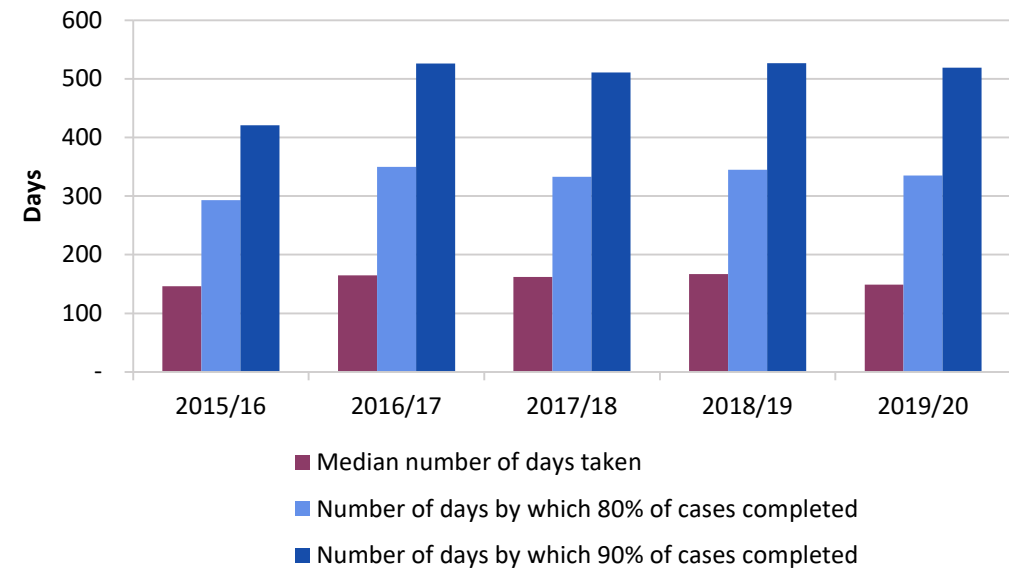


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Findings

In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20, was 335 days. This is a decrease of 2.9% from the 345 days for cases completed in 2018/19. The figure of 519 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was 1.5% lower than that recorded in 2018/19 (Figure 2, Appendix 1, Table 1).

Figure 2: Time taken for all cases from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



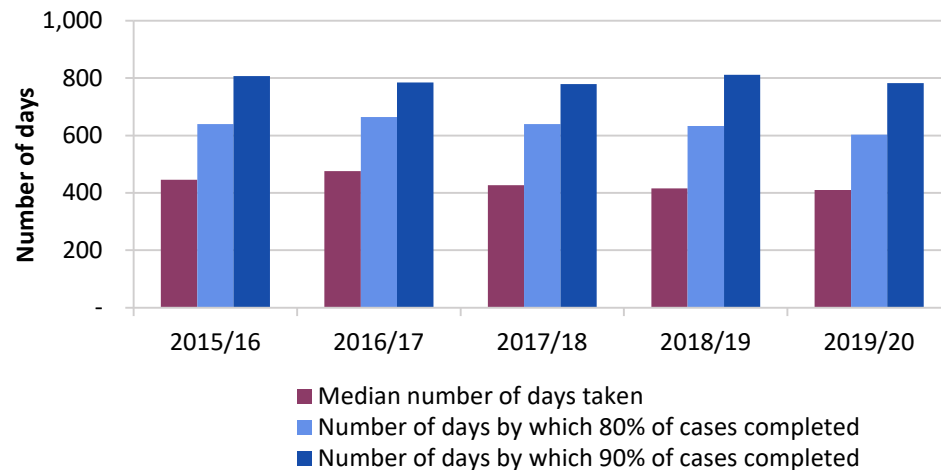
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Findings

3.4 Crown Court Cases – Time Taken

In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date the offence was reported, in relation to **charge cases dealt with at Crown Court**, was 410 days. This is a decrease of 1.4% from the median of 416 days taken in 2018/19 and 13.9% lower than the figure of 476 days recorded in 2016/17, the highest in the recent series. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 603 days, a decrease of 4.7% from 2018/19. The figure of 783 days, in relation to the time by which 90% of cases were completed, was the second lowest recorded in the last five years (Figure 3, Appendix 1, Table 2).

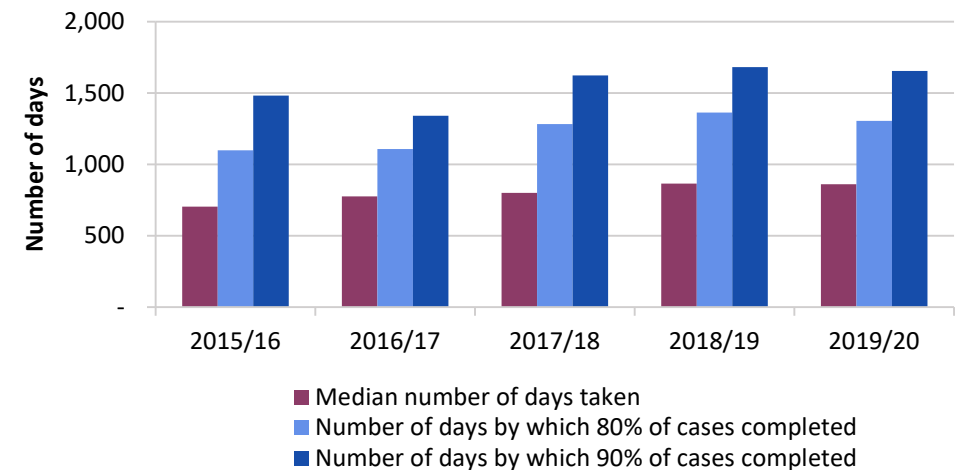
Figure 3: Time taken for charge cases dealt with at Crown Court, from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



Of all case types, **summons cases that are completed at Crown Court** have taken the longest time period in each of the last five years, in terms of the time taken from the date an incident was reported through to disposal at court. In 2019/20, the median time taken for completion of these cases was 861 days. This is the second highest median value recorded for this type of case in the past five years, just a slight decrease of 0.6% from the median of 866 days taken in 2018/19.

In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 1,305 days, again the second highest period of time recorded for this type of case in the past five years, though a decrease of 4.3% from 2018/19 (Figure 4, Appendix 1, Table 3).

Figure 4: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at Crown Court from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



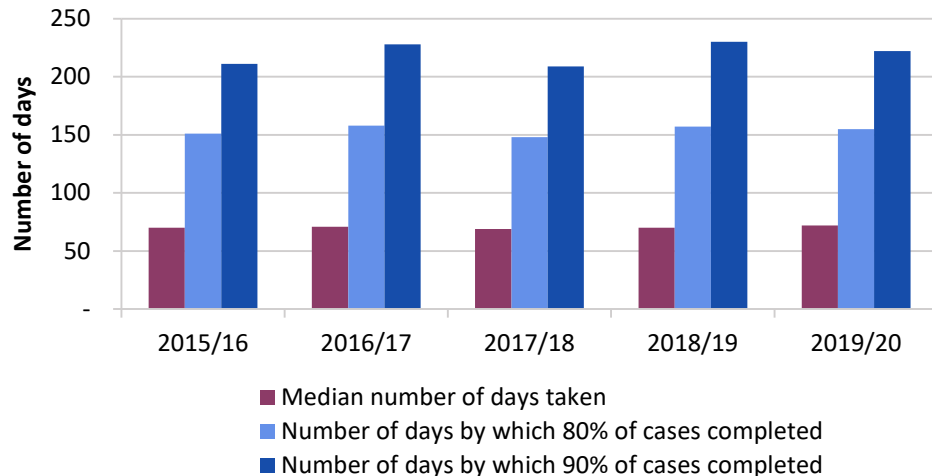
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Findings

3.5 Magistrates' Adult Courts – Time Taken

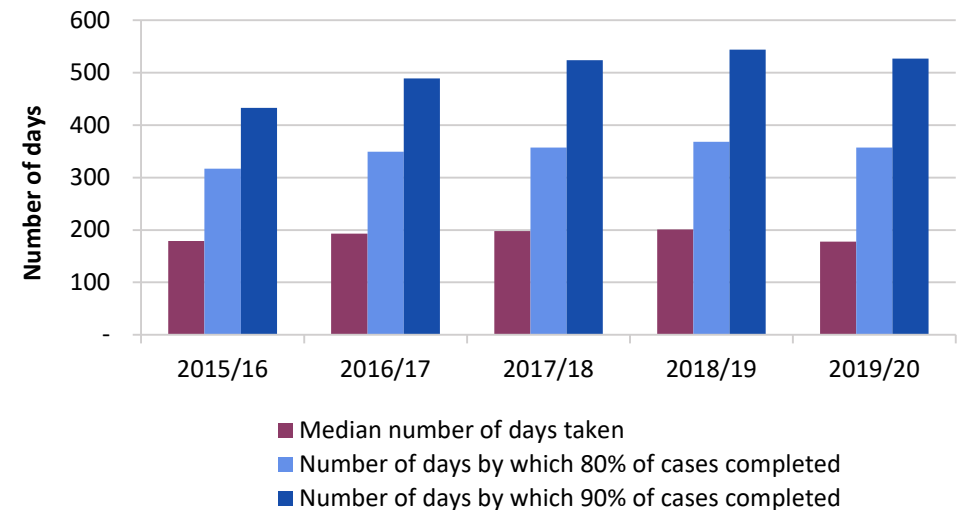
In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court from the date the offence was reported, in relation to **charge cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts**, was 72 days. This is an increase of 2.9% from 2018/19 and is the highest figure recorded in the last five years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 155 days, a decrease of 1.3% from 2018/19. The figure of 155 days, in relation to 80% of cases is the third highest value recorded for this type of case in the past five years. However, the number of days by which 90% of cases were completed in 2019/20 (222 days) was also the third highest recorded, at that level, in the last five years (Figure 5, appendix 1, Table 4).

Figure 5: Time taken for all cases for charge cases completed at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with at court in relation to **summons cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts**, was 178 days. This is a decrease of 11.4% from 2018/19 and the lowest median time recorded for this type of case in the last five years. In respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 357 days, a decrease of 3.0% from 2018/19 and, the same as the figure recorded for this type of case in 2017/18. The number of days by which 90% of cases were completed in 2019/20 was 527 days, the second highest number of days in the last five years (Figure 6, Appendix 1, Table 5).

Figure 6: Time taken for summons cases completed at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



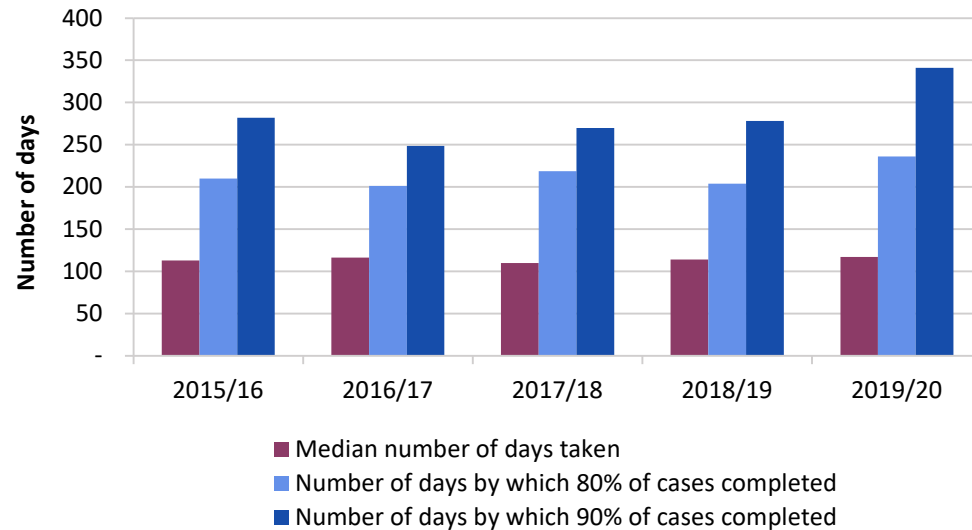
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Findings

3.6 Magistrates' Youth Courts – Time Taken

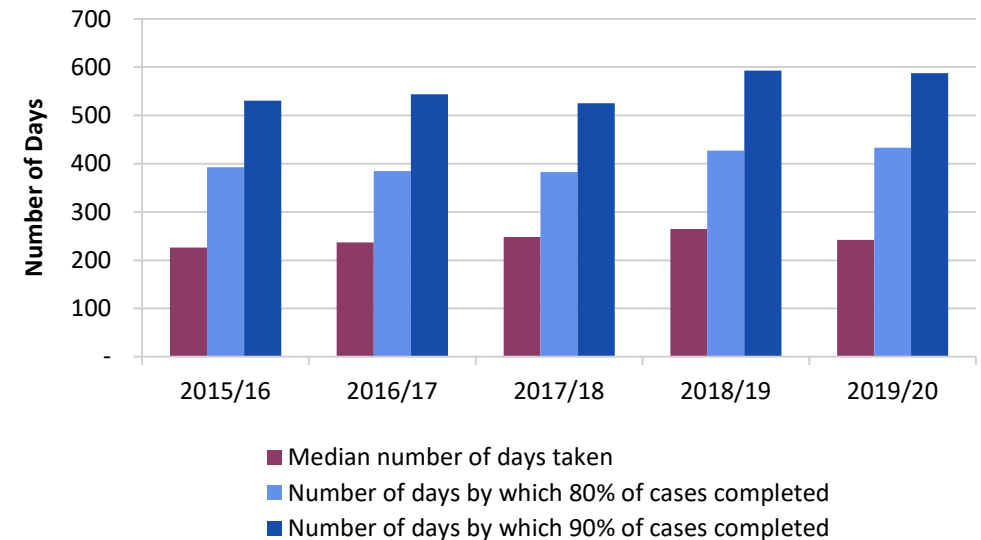
In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with in relation to **charge cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts**, was 117 days. This is an increase of 2.6% from the median of 114 days taken in 2018/19 and, the same as that recorded in 2016/17, the highest time recorded in the last five years. Similarly, in respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 236 days, an increase of 15.7% from 2018/19, and the highest recorded for this type of case in the last five years (Figure 7, Appendix 1, Table 6).

Figure 7: Time taken for charge cases completed at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



In 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with in relation to **summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts**, was 242 days, a decrease of 8.7% from 2018/19 and the lowest median value recorded for this type of case since 2016/17. However, in respect of the time by which 80% of cases were completed, the number of days taken in 2019/20 was 433 days, the highest figure recorded for this type of case, in any of the last five years (Figure 8, Appendix 1, Table 7).

Figure 8: Time taken for summons cases completed at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20



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Findings

3.7 Offence Category – Time Taken

In 2019/20, the median time taken for cases where the main offence was a sexual offence was 698 days, the longest for any of the offence categories . This is an increase of 4.6% on the figure for 2018/19 and the highest median figure, for this type of case, recorded in the last five years. Cases where the main offence category was a motoring or a public order offence had the shortest average times taken, from offence reported to disposal at court, at 119 and 123 days respectively, in 2019/20. Both of these were, respectively, the same median values for these types of cases that were last recorded in 2015/16 and lower than in any of the intervening years (Appendix 1, Table 8).

When considering average time taken for cases to complete however, it should be borne in mind that different types of cases may, by their nature, be more likely to be heard in either the Crown Court, or a magistrates' courts. Therefore, it may be more appropriate to make comparisons in relation to offence categories across time, rather than to compare times taken for cases falling into one offence category with another.

Appendix 1 - Tables

Table 1: Time taken for cases dealt with at all courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 23,018 | 24,135 | 22,995 | 23,793 | 23,585 |
| Median number of days taken | 146 | 165 | 162 | 167 | 149 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 293 | 350 | 333 | 345 | 335 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 421 | 526 | 511 | 527 | 519 |

Table 2: Time taken for charge cases dealt with at Crown Court from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 502 | 1,032 | 671 | 691 | 667 |
| Median number of days taken | 446 | 476 | 427 | 416 | 410 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 640 | 664 | 640 | 633 | 603 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 808 | 785 | 780 | 812 | 783 |

Table 3: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at Crown Court from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 313 | 825 | 556 | 536 | 641 |
| Median number of days taken | 704 | 776 | 802 | 866 | 861 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 1,099 | 1,108 | 1,283 | 1,364 | 1,305 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 1,483 | 1,341 | 1,625 | 1,682 | 1,655 |

Appendix 1 - Tables

Table 4: Time taken for charge cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Number of cases | 6,900 | 6,868 | 6,508 | 6,641 | 6,971 |
| Median number of days taken | 70 | 71 | 69 | 70 | 72 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 151 | 158 | 148 | 157 | 155 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 211 | 228 | 209 | 230 | 222 |

Table 5: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at adult magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 14,011 | 14,283 | 14,184 | 14,929 | 14,316 |
| Median number of days taken | 179 | 193 | 198 | 201 | 178 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 317 | 349 | 357 | 368 | 357 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 433 | 489 | 524 | 544 | 527 |

Table 6: Time taken for charge cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 481 | 352 | 381 | 346 | 319 |
| Median number of days taken | 113 | 117 | 110 | 114 | 117 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 210 | 201 | 219 | 204 | 236 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 282 | 249 | 270 | 278 | 341 |

Appendix 1 - Tables

Table 7: Time taken for summons cases dealt with at youth magistrates' courts from date incident reported to disposal at court, 2015/16 – 2019/20

| Offence Reported date to Court Disposal date | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|--|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Number of cases | 811 | 775 | 695 | 650 | 671 |
| Median number of days taken | 226 | 237 | 248 | 265 | 242 |
| Number of days by which 80% of cases completed | 393 | 385 | 383 | 427 | 433 |
| Number of days by which 90% of cases completed | 531 | 544 | 525 | 593 | 588 |

Appendix 1 - Tables

Table 8: Median Time (days) taken for all cases from date incident reported to disposal at court, by offence category, 2015/16 - 2019/20

| Offence category | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 | % cases disposed at Crown Court in 2019/20 |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--|
| Violence Against the Person | 210 | 240 | 229 | 244 | 219 | 8.6% |
| Sexual | 470 | 623 | 622 | 667 | 698 | 62.3% |
| Robbery | 379 | 462 | 438 | 342 | 374 | 80.8% |
| Theft | 166 | 198 | 188 | 211 | 196 | 5.3% |
| Burglary | 257 | 337 | 263 | 270 | 256 | 31.3% |
| Criminal Damage | 161 | 173 | 177 | 164 | 158 | 1.7% |
| Drugs | 168 | 202 | 183 | 181 | 166 | 9.6% |
| Possession of Weapons | 130 | 191 | 177 | 169 | 160 | 4.9% |
| Public Order | 123 | 133 | 137 | 138 | 123 | 2.1% |
| Motoring | 119 | 130 | 139 | 141 | 119 | 0.4% |
| Fraud | 389 | 441 | 382 | 476 | 356 | 11.5% |
| Miscellaneous | 185 | 216 | 223 | 229 | 250 | 20.4% |
| Total | 146 | 165 | 162 | 167 | 149 | 5.5% |

Source: Department of Justice

Notes:

1. Figures relate to cases dealt with at court during the time period specified. Each period is a financial year, running from 1st April to the following 31st March. They relate to the number of calendar days between the listed dates for each table. Court recess dates are not taken into account.
2. Figures relate to cases brought on behalf of the PSNI, Harbour and Airport police in Northern Ireland that resulted in a court disposal.
3. Figures do not include cases where the case was dismissed but a caution was administered, fixed penalty registrations, penalty notices for disorder or cases resulting from a breach of a court order. Successful youth engagement cases were also excluded.
4. Offence category relates to principal offence. Offences within each category were revised in 2019/20 and, as a result, there may be slight variances in which category some cases were counted in across the period. This exercise was undertaken with a view to achieving more standardised reporting of offence categories across the justice system.

Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

1.1 Introduction

The criminal justice system is designed to deliver various, appropriate disposals when a defendant has been found guilty for an offence. Diversion and the operation of discretion can help ensure that lower level offending is subject to early and proportionate actions. At this early stage, many cases are diverted from the more formal justice system into an out of court disposal option, for reasons of public policy or for the good of the individual or broader public.

For cases that do proceed to prosecution at court, there are two main courts in Northern Ireland—the Crown Court and magistrates’ courts (both adult and youth). As the division of cases between the two types of courts depends primarily on the nature of the offences to be tried and the potential length of sentence which may be imposed, the time taken for a case in the Crown Court may be longer than that seen in magistrates’ courts. Further, there are additional cases that may proceed to prosecution but do not reach the end of the full court process, due either to lack of sufficient evidence or because the charge is withdrawn.

Cases may be brought to court by way of summons or charge and defendants may end up having their case heard in various types of court. However, despite differences in the types of court, the types of offences and the method by which a defendant is brought to court, the process through which a case proceeds from offence reported to case dealt with is generally the same (detailed in Figure 9 below).

Figure 9: Process Map from Offence Reported to Court Disposal



Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

The offence is first reported to the police, or detected by the police, (offence reported), after which an investigation is conducted. Subject to the outcome of that investigation, the police may charge a suspect, or inform the suspect that they are to be reported (charged/informed) to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), who will review the case and take a decision as to whether or not to instigate a prosecution.

If a decision is made to prosecute by way of a charge sheet, this involves the police charging the suspect, who has been arrested, and the PPS reviewing the charge before the first court appearance to make sure there is enough evidence at that stage for the defendant to be prosecuted. The defendant will either be:

- held in police custody overnight and produced at the first available court, where the court will then have to consider the issue of bail; or
- released on police bail to appear before court on a stated date within 28 days from the charge.

If the case is commenced by way of a summons, this is issued by either the PPS or a third party (i.e. a government department) and is served on the defendant either by post or in person. The defendant will be required to go to court on the date stated on the summons.

When the police have collected enough evidence, a case file will be prepared and submitted to the PPS (PPS submission). The PPS then must apply the test for prosecution and decide whether to prosecute (PPS decision). If the PPS decides to prosecute, a first court date will be set (first court appearance) and the case will proceed through the court as normal (with the examination of evidence and witnesses and opportunities for both the prosecution and defence to make their cases). The process concludes when a decision is made by the court. A case is dealt with in court when a defendant is either acquitted, or if the defendant is convicted, when a sentence has been handed down (court disposal).

It is important to note however, that cases instigated by way of police charge (rather than reported to PPS), will ordinarily appear in court prior to PPS taking a prosecution decision. In general, the purpose of such pre-prosecution decision hearings is to determine issues such as bail or remand. For the purpose of this bulletin therefore, in cases brought before the court by way of charge, the date of the first court appearance relates to the first occasion on which the case appears in court after the PPS has taken a decision to prosecute. In effect therefore, the data ignores court appearances which occur before a prosecution decision is taken. The Department has adopted this approach, with the agreement of criminal justice partners, in order to provide a better basis for comparing charge cases with reported cases.

Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

1.2 What counts as a case?

The figures reported in this bulletin relate to cases dealt with at court in the year specified, where the case was prosecuted by the Public Prosecution Service on behalf of PSNI, Harbour Police, Airport Constabulary or the National Crime Agency (NCA).

For the purposes of the statistics presented in this publication, a case may be considered to commence when an offence is first reported to, or detected by, the PSNI, Harbour Police, Airport Constabulary or the NCA. The case then proceeds through the various stages of the criminal justice system until it is considered dealt with, as a result of a prosecution at court. The time period measured therefore, is the number of calendar days from Offence Reported Date to Courts Disposal Date, for cases dealt with at courts in the 12 months ending in the year specified in the tables. Court recess dates are not taken into account.

Cases dealt with through an out of court disposal, or which do not reach the end of the full court process for the reasons listed above, do not go through the standard stages of the court system and, as such, are not directly comparable with cases that have gone through the judicial system. They are therefore **excluded** from the dataset. Similarly, cases relating to breaches of court orders previously imposed are **excluded** from the dataset, as they relate to a court order made in relation to a previous offence and have not proceeded through the various stages in the criminal justice process in the same way that cases relating to other offences may have.

Due to the exclusions outlined above, the figures in this publication, therefore, should not be considered as the total number of cases dealt with in courts in the years concerned, rather, only as the number of cases in the dataset upon which the calculations derived for this publication are based. Overall case volumes dealt with by the Northern Ireland courts may be sourced on the [NICTS statistics bulletins](#) page.

The court processing time dataset is based on the principal offence (main offence) at conviction or disposal. Where an offender is convicted of several offences on the same occasion, only one offence, the principal offence, is counted. The basis for selection of the principal offence is laid down in rules issued by the Home Office. In summary, the rules stipulate that only offences with an admission or finding of guilty are included and the principal offence is usually taken as that for which the greatest penalty was imposed. Where there is no conviction as a result of a prosecution, the principal offence is generally taken as the one which might have drawn the most severe penalty, should a conviction have occurred. The methodology for calculation of the principal offence may be found on the [principal offence methodology paper](#) page.

Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

The offence counted and used in the compilation of figures in this bulletin is the one on which the court took its final decision. In relation to convictions, this is not necessarily the same offence as that for which the defendant was initially prosecuted. The decision recorded is that reached by the court and takes no account of any subsequent appeal to a higher court.

1.3 Data source

The data for this bulletin were taken from the Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism (DSM1). They were extracted primarily based on records contained on the Criminal Records Viewer (CRV). The CRV is held on Causeway and utilises data which originated in the PSNI, PPS and from Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS). Causeway is an interconnected information system, launched as a joint undertaking by the Criminal Justice Organisations (CJOs) in Northern Ireland.

1.4 Data quality and validation

Following guidance provided by the Office for National Statistics on the Quality Assessment of Administrative Data, information pertaining to data quality and validation is continually assessed. While the relevant CJOs have a vested interest in maintaining the accuracy of data within their management information systems, a number of accuracy, quality assurance/validation procedures have been conducted upon the dataset used to compile this data series, to ensure the data extracted are accurate, complete and fit for the statistical purposes for which they are to be used. Both automated and manual checks have been carried out, at individual case level and, data corrected, where possible, to ensure that:

- key fields are complete and logical; and,
- a general check of the data as a whole suggests no other anomalies.

Examples of some of the changes made to the dataset as part of the validation process for 2019/20 included: the removal of 2,014 cases relating to breaches of court orders, 5 cases were amended where the defendant was recorded as being under 10 at the time of the offence and, 7 were recoded as charge cases, as this information was missing from the original dataset.

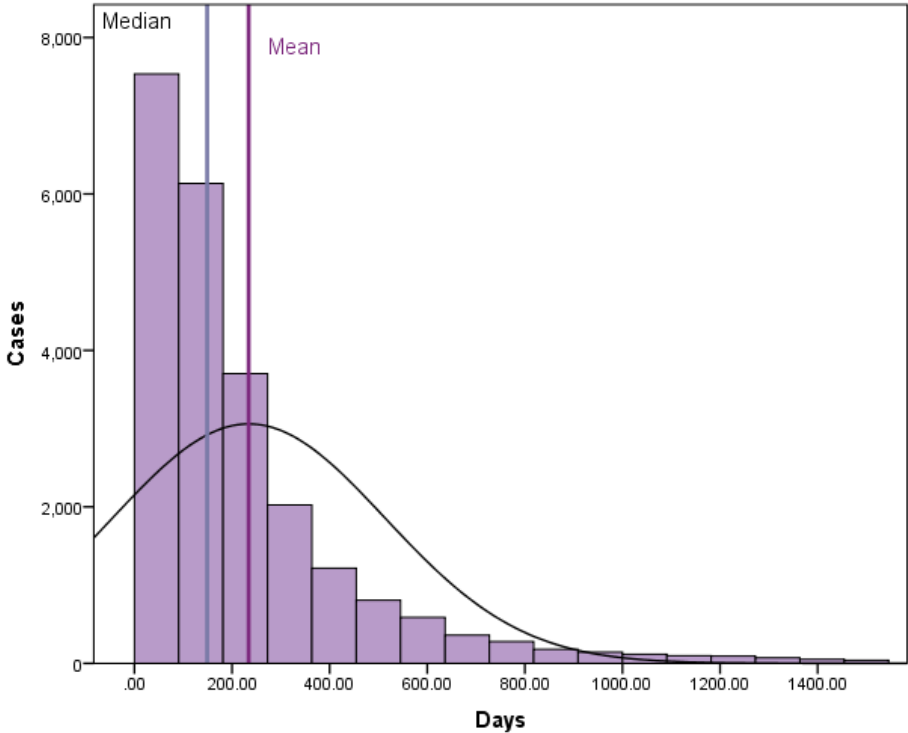
Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

1.5 Interpreting the data

Figures reported relate primarily to the average time taken, from Offence Reported Date to Courts Disposal Date. The form of average reported on in this bulletin is the median, or the value below which 50 per cent of cases were completed. Figures for the time taken to deal with cases at the 80th and 90th percentiles (the time taken for 80% and 90% of cases to be dealt with respectively) are also reported.

The median is used as the measure of average in relation to this measure. Initial data exploration identified that, when there are a few cases that have taken a long time to complete, measurement of the mean time taken for cases may be affected by a distribution curve with a long tail, i.e., by a small number of cases that have taken an inordinately long time. Therefore, given the distribution of cases in relation to the time taken to complete them, the median, rather than the mean, is the best way to measure the midpoint in the series and thus to remove any possible skew caused by cases that may, for various reasons, take an inordinately long time to process or complete. For example, the ‘average’ number of days taken to complete a case in 2019/20, when measured using the median was 149 days, compared to 234 days when measured using the mean. This latter figure however, equates to the 68th percentile in terms of time taken for a case to be completed (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Distribution curve of cases by days taken from offence reported date to case dealt with at court date, 2019/20



Appendix 2 – Methodology and Counting Rules

1.6 Statistical coverage

The data included in the bulletin are based on cases resulting in a conviction in a court, where the conviction did not end in a subsequent diversion, and which were recorded as completed in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020. Statistical coverage is restricted to those criminal prosecutions which were brought on behalf of the PSNI, the NCA, the Airport Constabulary or Harbour Police. As already stated, cases relating to breaches of court orders previously imposed are not included, nor are cases that end in an out of court disposal. Further, prosecutions brought by government departments, public bodies and private individuals are not included, as their prosecution is beyond the remit of the Department of Justice.

The court structure of Northern Ireland does not equate to the court structures of England and Wales, Scotland or the Republic of Ireland, and therefore no comparisons have been made between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK and Ireland.

1.7 Analysis and Presentation of Statistics

The data used in this report are validated, maintained and analysed using IBM SPSS, which is a statistical package commonly used within social science.

For ease of use, figures in charts are given as whole numbers, whereas percentages throughout the text and tables are reported to one decimal place. Whilst tables of information have been included in Appendix 1, the tables are also published alongside this bulletin in Microsoft Excel and OpenDocument Spreadsheet format, for ease of use.

1.8 Future publications

The next Statistical Bulletin on Case Processing Time, covering the 2020/21 financial year (1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021), will be published in late summer 2021.

1.9 Official Statistics

These are ‘Official Statistics’ as defined in Section 6 of the Statistics and Registration Services Act 2007. Statisticians from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency are seconded to the DoJ and are responsible for ensuring that the statistics produced comply with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

The DoJ would value any feedback on this report and welcome recommendations on the future addition of data that may be of interest to readers. Contact details are provided on the contents page at the start of this bulletin.