



# Police Recorded Drug Seizures and Arrests in Northern Ireland

## Update to 31st March 2023

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The number of drug seizure incidents recorded by the police has shown a mainly upwards trend since 2006/07.

Drug-related arrests mainly increased between 2006/07 and 2019/20. A fall in each of 2020/21 and 2021/22 has been followed by an increase in the latest financial year.

In 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31st March 2023:

- There were 8,867 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 271 (3.2 per cent) on the previous 12 months.
- There was a rise in the number of Class A and Class C drug seizure incidents, and a slight fall in the number of Class B seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A), benzodiazepines (Class C) and pregabalin (Class C).
- Six policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents.
- There were 3,246 drug-related arrests, an increase of 103 (3.3 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months.
- Seven policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests, with Belfast City showing the largest rise.

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We welcome comment and feedback on these statistics. If you would like to forward your views, receive notification of new publications or be kept informed of developments relating to PSNI statistics, please email your contact details using the email address provided on the cover page.

# 1. Things you need to know about this release

## Coverage

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

Statistics on police recorded drug seizures and arrests in Northern Ireland are collated and produced by statisticians seconded to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA).

This release presents provisional statistics relating to police recorded drug seizures and arrests to 31 March 2023. Figures were compiled on 10 May 2023; as of that date 96% of seizure incidents for April 2022 to March 2023 have been fully validated; 4% are fully/partly outstanding or are still awaiting PSNI confirmation. As seizure incidents continue to be processed, this will lead to an increase in the number of drug seizures recorded since April 2022. Supplementary data are available from the PSNI website in the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#).

The next update covering provisional figures for the 12 months to 30 June 2023 will be published in July 2023. The PSNI website has a full [publication schedule \(opens in a new window\)](#).

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

**Geographic breakdown:** Seizure incidents and arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. During the latest twelve months Belfast City policing district accounted for 32 percent of all drug seizure incidents and 40 per cent of drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West). To assist in the understanding of the statistics drug seizure incidents for Belfast City policing district have been captured at this geographic level from the start of 2016/17, while this breakdown is available for drug-related arrests from 2006/07.

## 2. What is happening to drug seizures over the longer term?

The number of drug seizure incidents has increased each year since 2006/07, with the exception of a slight fall in 2016/17. The level recorded in 2022/23 (8,867 seizure incidents) is almost three and a half times the level recorded in 2006/07 (2,590 seizure incidents).

**Figure 1 Trends in drug seizure incidents since 2006/07**

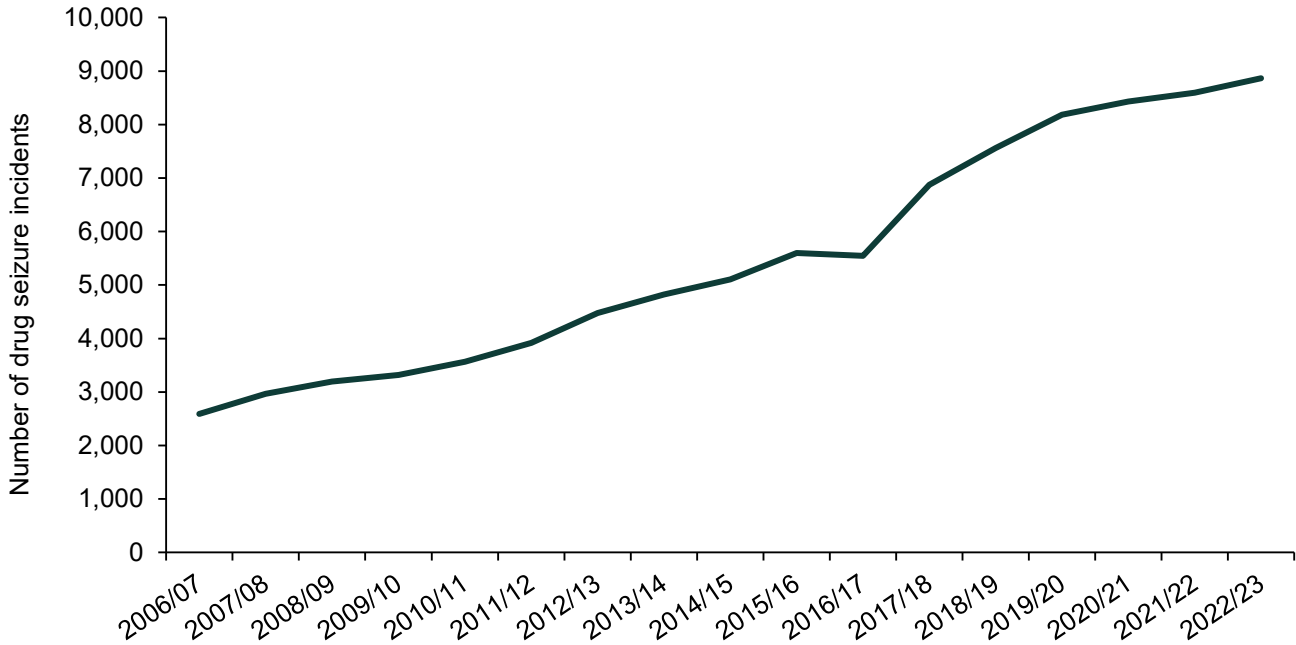
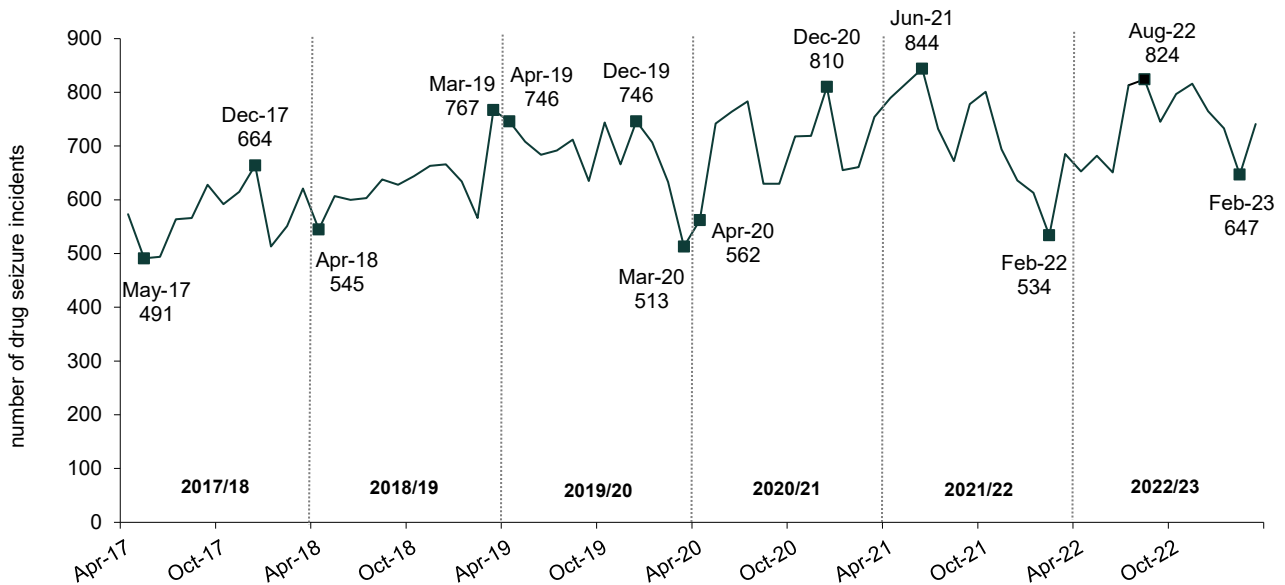


Figure 2 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2017. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug seizures. Covid-19 legal restrictions were replaced by guidance on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

**Figure 2 Drug seizure incidents each month April 2017 to March 2023, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year**



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

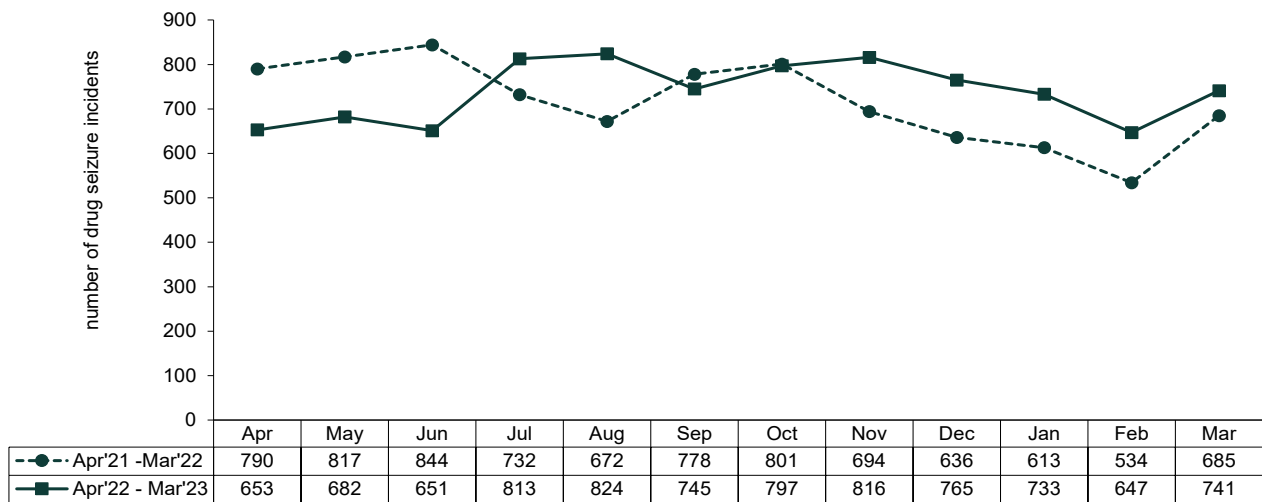
### 3. What has been happening to drug seizures more recently?

In the 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023:

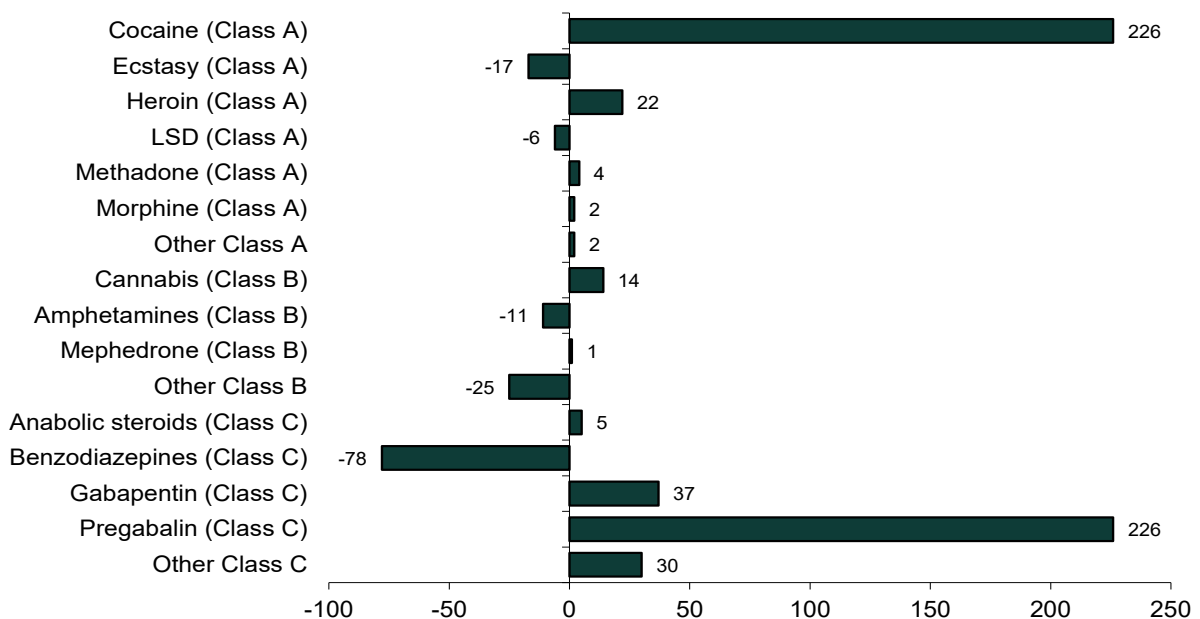
- There were 8,867 drug seizure incidents, an increase of 271 (3.2 per cent) on the previous 12 months when 8,596 were recorded.
- There was a rise in the number of Class A and Class C, and a fall in the number of Class B seizure incidents.
- Cannabis (Class B) was the most commonly seized drug, followed by cocaine (Class A), benzodiazepines (Class C) and pregabalin (Class C). Figure 4 shows the change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized during the latest 12 months compared with the previous 12 months.
- The trend in drug seizure incidents is similar to that seen for the number of drug offences recorded by police over the same time period. Drug offence figures are available in the Pivot Table-Crime worksheet in the [Police Recorded Crime spreadsheet, monthly update to March 2023 \(opens in new window\)](#). Please note that as seizure incidents continue to be processed, this will lead to an increase in the number of drug seizures recorded since April 2022.

Details of the quantities of each drug type seized are available in Tables 4 and 5 of the [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#).

**Figure 3 Drug seizure incidents April 2021 to March 2023**



**Figure 4 Change in the number of seizure incidents by type of drug seized, 12 months to March 2023 compared with the previous 12 months**



**Table 1** Number of drug seizures<sup>1</sup> by class and drug type

Drug class <sup>2</sup>	Drug type <sup>2</sup>	Drug seizure incidents Apr'21-Mar'22	Drug seizure incidents Apr'22-Mar'23 <sup>3</sup>	change
Class A	Cocaine	1,261	1,487	226
	Ecstasy	116	99	-17
	Heroin	133	155	22
	LSD	26	20	-6
	Methadone	7	11	4
	Morphine	15	17	2
	Other Class A <sup>4</sup>	89	91	2
	<b>All Class A</b>	<b>1,577</b>	<b>1,790</b>	<b>213</b>
Class B	<i>Herbal cannabis</i>	5,466	5,416	-50
	<i>Cannabis resin</i>	140	244	104
	<i>Cannabis plants</i>	97	63	-34
	<i>Cannabis, other formats</i>	702	692	-10
	<b>Total cannabis</b>	<b>6,014</b>	<b>6,028</b>	<b>14</b>
	Amphetamines	109	98	-11
	Mephedrone	3	4	1
	Other Class B <sup>5</sup>	230	205	-25
<b>All Class B</b>	<b>6,198</b>	<b>6,193</b>	<b>-5</b>	
Class C	Anabolic steroids	39	44	5
	Benzodiazepines	1,204	1,126	-78
	Gabapentin	45	82	37
	Pregabalin	807	1,033	226
	Other Class C <sup>6</sup>	211	241	30
	<b>All Class C</b>	<b>1,921</b>	<b>2,074</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>All drugs</b>	<b>8,596</b>	<b>8,867</b>	<b>271</b>	

<sup>1</sup> As each seizure incident can involve more than one class or type of drug, seizure figures for individual drugs cannot be added together to produce totals as this will sum to more than the total number of seizures.

<sup>2</sup> Not all drug seizures are subject to forensic testing to officially confirm the drug type seized. When testing is not applied, the PSNI's drug seizure statistics are classified in accordance with the investigating officer's assessment of the drug type seized based on their experience and knowledge of the illegal drug trade in Northern Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> Changes can be expected to figures from 1st April 2022 each time they are published as these records are subject to ongoing validation and quality assurance processes. Finalised figures for the period April 2021 to March 2022 were published in September 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Other Class A drugs include fentanyl/ fentanyl derivatives, oxycodone, psilocin (magic mushrooms) and methamphetamine (crystal meth).

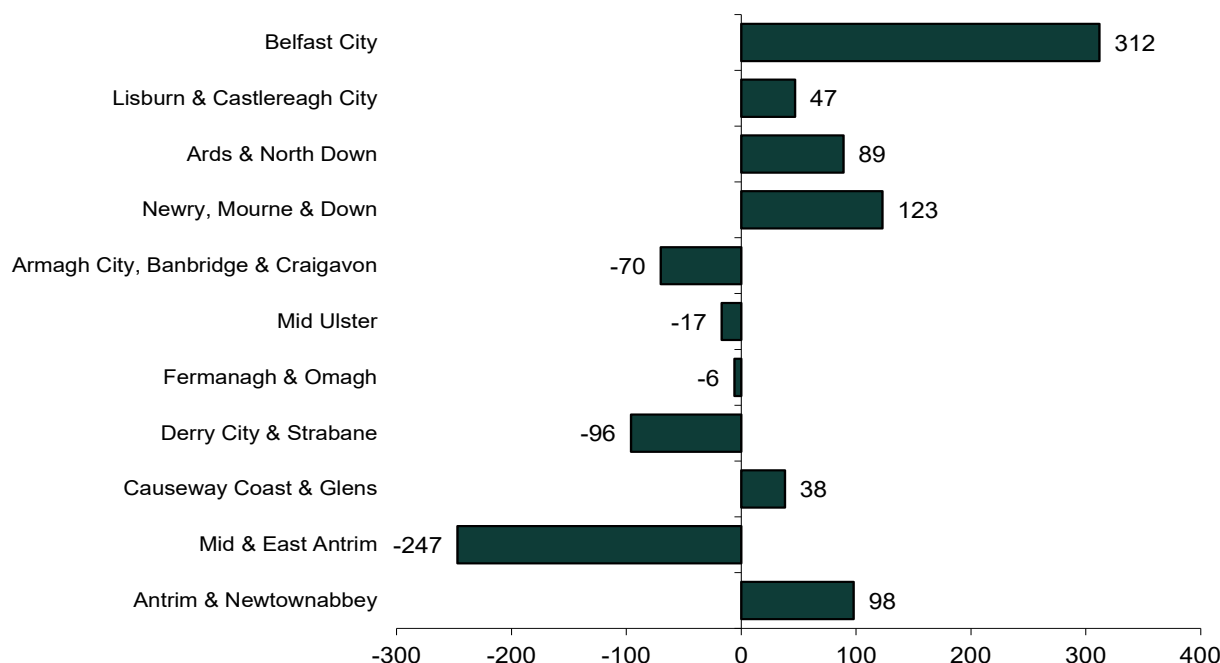
<sup>5</sup> Other Class B drugs include cathinone derivatives, codeine/ dihydrocodeine, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), ketamine, barbiturates and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.

<sup>6</sup> Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/ GBL and 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

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

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, six policing districts showed an increase in drug seizure incidents. [Table 2 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)]

**Figure 5** Change in drug seizure incidents by policing district, 12 months to March 2023 compared with the previous 12 months



**Table 2** Drug seizure incidents by policing district

Policing district <sup>1</sup>	Drug seizure incidents Apr'21-mar'22	Drug seizure incidents Apr'22-Mar'23 <sup>2</sup>	change
Belfast City	2,526	2,838	312
<i>East</i>	376	318	-58
<i>North</i>	677	871	194
<i>South</i>	998	1,080	82
<i>West</i>	475	569	94
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	721	768	47
Ards & North Down	335	424	89
Newry, Mourne & Down	639	762	123
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	797	727	-70
Mid Ulster	546	529	-17
Fermanagh & Omagh	375	369	-6
Derry City & Strabane	885	789	-96
Causeway Coast & Glens	450	488	38
Mid & East Antrim	879	632	-247
Antrim & Newtownabbey	443	541	98
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>8,596</b>	<b>8,867</b>	<b>271</b>

<sup>1</sup> Seizure incidents are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounts for 32 percent of all drug seizure incidents recorded in Northern Ireland. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West).

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

## 5. What is happening to drug-related arrests over the longer term?

A drug-related arrest is counted when a person is arrested and processed through custody for one or more drug-related offences. The figures presented are a count of custody records rather than a count of persons arrested. Where a person has been arrested on more than one occasion during a financial year, each occasion on which they have been arrested will be counted separately. The arrest figures do not include persons who are street-bailed but are not later processed through custody. Arrest figures remain subject to change as persons may be re-arrested for additional offences on return to custody.

The number of arrests for drug offences increased in most of the years between 2006/07 and 2019/20, with falls experienced in 2014/15 (1.3 per cent) and 2016/17 (8.2 per cent). Subsequent falls have been recorded in each of 2020/21 (13.1 per cent) and 2021/22 (5.7 per cent), with a rise in 2022/23 (3.246) is nearly twice that recorded in 2006/07 (1,709).

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

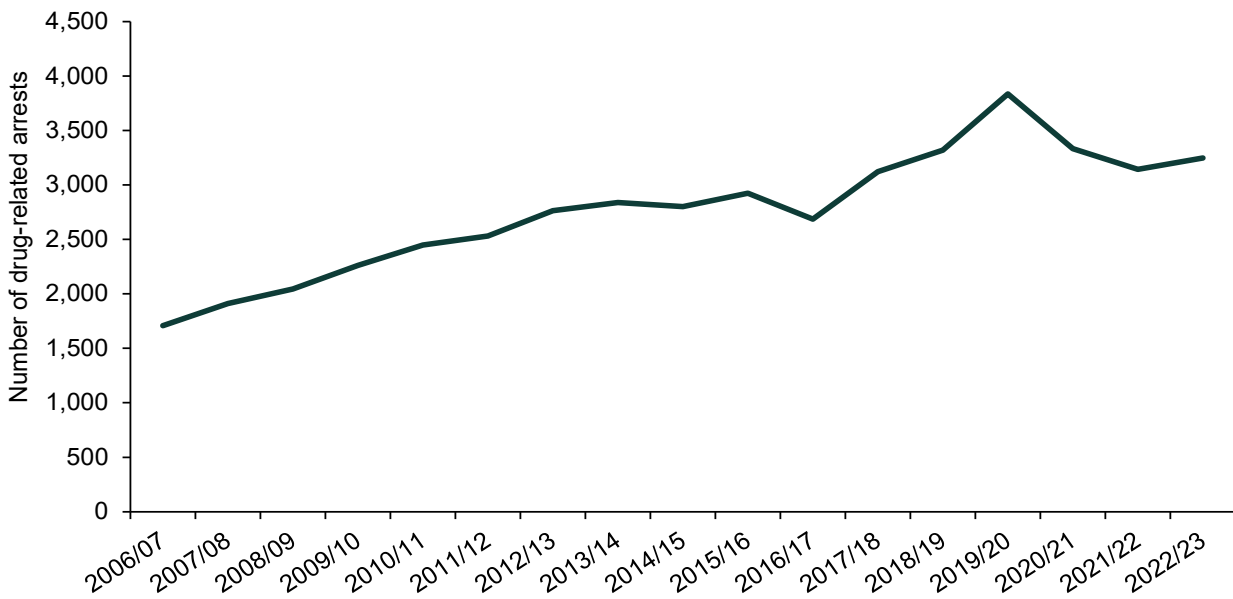
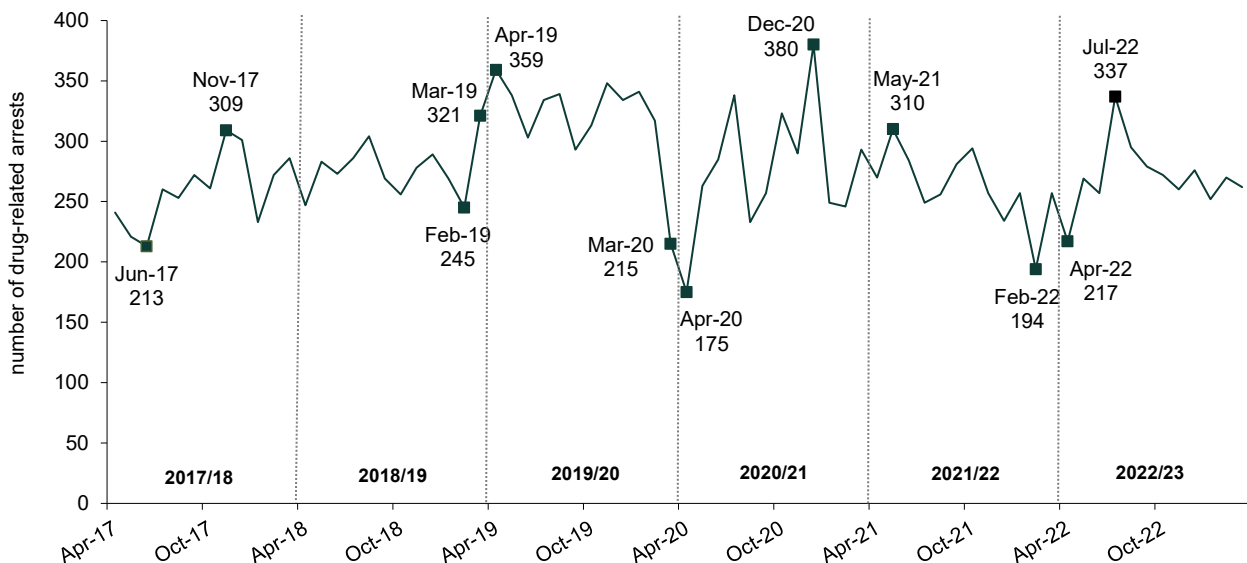


Figure 7 shows the pattern of drug seizure incidents each month since April 2017. Lockdown measures in relation to Covid-19 were first introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and may have had an impact on the number of drug arrests. Covid-19 legal restrictions were replaced by guidance on 15<sup>th</sup> February 2022.

**Figure 7 Drug-related arrests each month April 2017 to March 2023, showing the highest and lowest levels in each financial year**



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

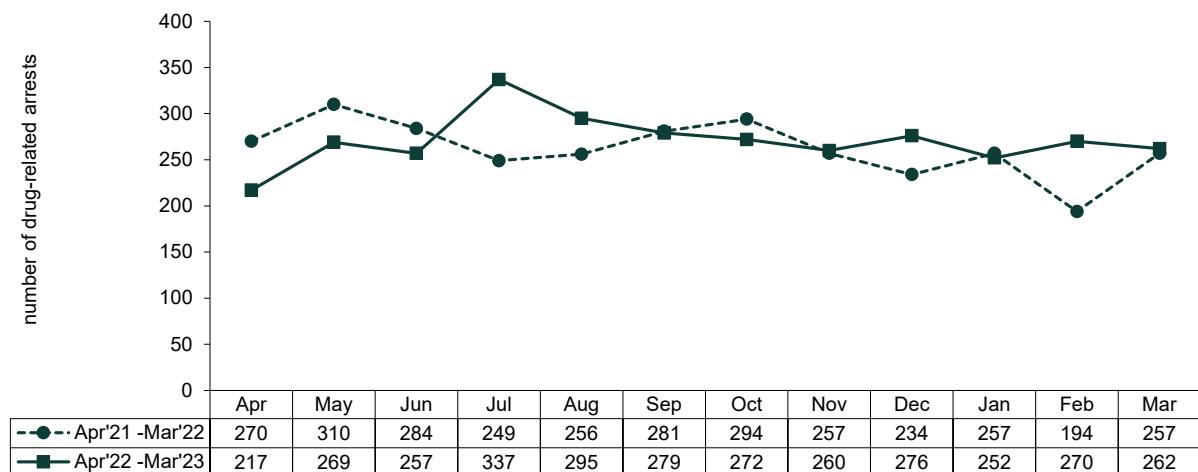


## 6. What has been happening to drug-related arrests more recently?

In the 12 months from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2022 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023:

- There were 3,246 drug-related arrests, an increase of 103 (3.3 per cent) when compared with the previous 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)].
- The trend in drug-related arrests is similar to that seen for the number of drug seizure incidents and drug offences recorded by police over the same time period. Drug offence figures are available in the Pivot Table-Crime worksheet in the [Police Recorded Crime spreadsheet, monthly update to March 2023 \(opens in new window\)](#).
- There were 194 drug-related arrests in February 2022, which is the lowest monthly figure since April 2020 when there were 175 drug-related arrests.
- The largest falls in drug arrests between April 2022 and March 2023 when compared with previous 12 months were seen in April, May and June which were lower by 53, 41 and 27 respectively.
- Drug-related arrests were higher in six of the months between April 2022 and March 2023 when compared with the previous 12 month period, with July and February showing the highest increases of 88 and 76 respectively.

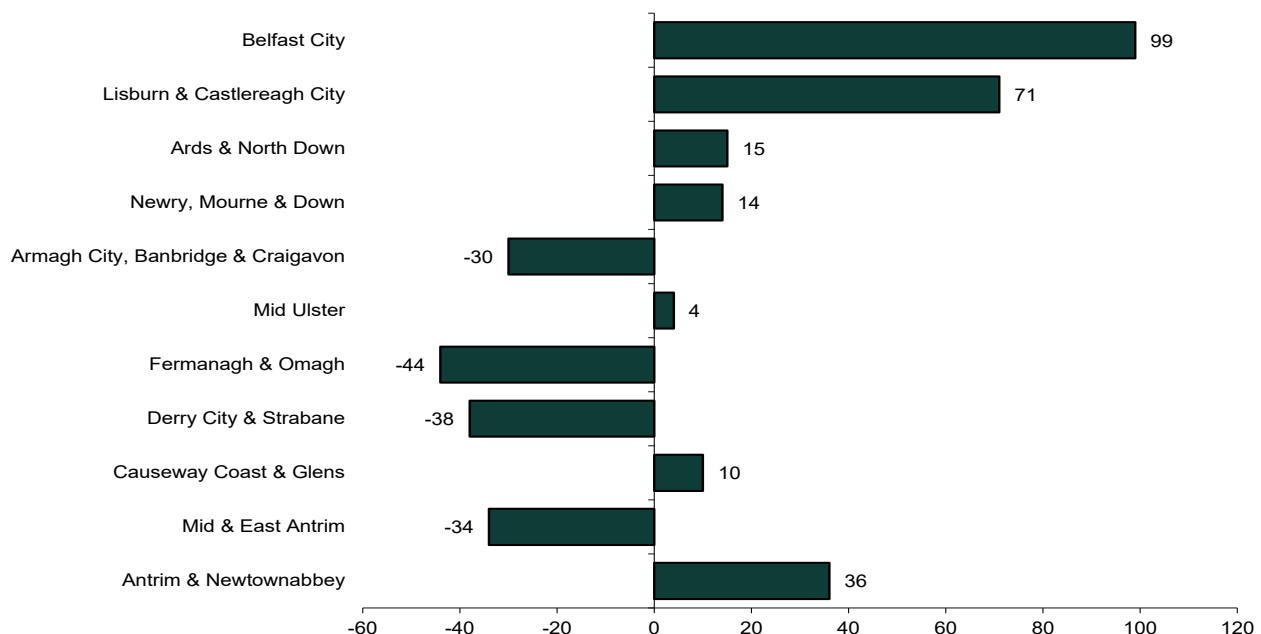
**Figure 8 Drug-related arrests April 2021 to March 2023**



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

When comparing the current and previous 12 months, seven policing districts showed an increase in drug-related arrests. Belfast City showed the largest increase. Belfast City accounted for more than two fifths of all drug-related arrests during the latest 12 months. [Table 3 and [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#)].

**Figure 9 Change in drug-related arrests by policing district, 12 months to March 2023 compared with the previous 12 months**



**Table 3 Drug-related arrests by policing district**

Policing district <sup>1</sup>	Drug-related arrests Apr'21-Mar'22	Drug-related arrests Apr'22-Mar'23 <sup>2</sup>	change
Belfast City	1,238	1,337	99
<i>East</i>	182	155	-27
<i>North</i>	327	391	64
<i>South</i>	523	548	25
<i>West</i>	206	243	37
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	166	237	71
Ards & North Down	126	141	15
Newry, Mourne & Down	202	216	14
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	263	233	-30
Mid Ulster	131	135	4
Fermanagh & Omagh	122	78	-44
Derry City & Strabane	392	354	-38
Causeway Coast & Glens	152	162	10
Mid & East Antrim	197	163	-34
Antrim & Newtownabbey	154	190	36
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	<b>3,143</b>	<b>3,246</b>	<b>103</b>

<sup>1</sup> Drug-related arrests are provided at policing district level; policing districts are analogous to District Council areas. Belfast City policing district accounted for 41 per cent of all drug-related arrests recorded in Northern Ireland during the 12 months to December 2022. It includes four local policing teams based in Lisburn Road (South), Tennent Street (North), Strandtown (East) and Woodbourne (West).

<sup>2</sup> Arrest figures remain subject to change as persons may be re-arrested for additional offences on return to custody.

## 8. Background and Data Quality

### Data Collection

When a drug is seized by police there are procedures in place that cover the handling, management, storage and disposal of seized substances. One requirement of these procedures is that the details of the seized substances are added to PSNI's record management system. Statistics on drug seizures are based on information extracted from PSNI's record management system and separately collated on a bespoke database. In order for a seizure to be included in the published statistics a range of information is required including, but not limited to, drug type, drug format, estimated weight or quantity seized and any details relating to forensic examination.

Drug-related arrests are extracted from custody data, where a person has been arrested and processed through police custody for one or more drug-related offences, those arrests related to the Misuse of Drugs Act are presented in this bulletin. Persons arrested and street-bailed, dealt with by other means or whose detention was not authorised are not included in these statistics.

### Data Quality

A quality assurance process is in place to ensure that the data is fit for purpose and published to the highest possible standard. A set of checks have been written to identify incidents that indicate drugs may have been seized. Where there are no drugs details available, each record will be followed up to confirm seizure and ensure the required details are input. A range of data quality checks are regularly conducted on the seizure data to identify incomplete or inconsistent records, potential duplication of records and input errors. Large seizures are also checked.

Further details on Police Recorded Drug Seizure and Arrest statistics are available in the [Drug Seizures and Arrests User Guide \(opens in a new window\)](#).

### Classification of Drug Types

The Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 divides drugs into three categories, Class A, B and C, according to the harmfulness they cause to the user or to society when they are misused. Class A drugs are considered to be the most harmful. Further information on drugs covered under the MDA is available in this [controlled drugs list \(opens in a new window\)](#).

Class A	Class B	Class C
Cocaine	Amphetamines	Anabolic Steroids
Ecstasy	Cannabis	Benzodiazepines <sup>5</sup>
Heroin	Mephedrone	Pregabalin <sup>3</sup>
LSD	Other Class B <sup>2</sup>	Gabapentin <sup>3</sup>
Methadone		Other Class C <sup>4</sup>
Morphine		
Other Class A <sup>1</sup>		

<sup>1</sup> Other Class A drugs include fentanyl, oxycodone, psilocin (magic mushrooms) and methamphetamine (crystal meth).

<sup>2</sup> Other Class B drugs include cathinone derivatives, codeine/dihydrocodeine, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), ketamine and synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.

<sup>3</sup> Pregabalin and gabapentin were reclassified as Class C controlled substances in April 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Other Class C drugs include tramadol, buprenorphine, GHB/GBL, 'Z-class' drugs (zolpidem, zopiclone and zaleplon).

<sup>5</sup> Flualprazolam, flunitrazolam and norfludiazepam were classified as Class C controlled substances in August 2021 and are recorded as Benzodiazepines.

### Data Use

The drug seizures and drug-related arrests statistics are mainly used within PSNI as management information and to monitor performance on drug crime targets against the policing plan. The figures are also used by government departments and other voluntary and statutory agencies to inform debate and policy development regarding drug crime in NI.

### Data Availability

A consistent data series at the overall level of drug seizure incident and drug-related arrest is available dating back to 2006/07, while a consistent data series at the level of individual drug type and format is available for the period dating back to 2012/13. These data series are published in the [Annual Trends report \(opens in a new window\)](#) on the PSNI website.

**Publication**

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

Tables and charts in this bulletin are available on the PSNI website in the form of an accompanying [drug seizures and arrests spreadsheet, quarterly update to March 2023 \(opens in a new window\)](#), which also provides additional levels of detail. It is available in both excel spreadsheet format and open document spreadsheet format.

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