

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

# Suspected drug deaths in Scotland: July to September 2021

## 1. Background

In January 2021 the Scottish Government announced a National Mission to reduce Scotland's unacceptable drug death rates. Part of this commitment is to improve data and surveillance. This report is published quarterly and focusses on management information from Police Scotland on suspected drug deaths, to provide as timely an indication of current trends in drug deaths in Scotland as is possible. Statistics from the National Records of Scotland (NRS) are also presented for wider context.

## 2. Summary

Suspected drug deaths fell over the two most recent calendar quarters, with 4% (40) fewer suspected deaths recorded between January and September 2021 than over the same period of 2020. However, despite these recent decreases, suspected drug deaths remain at a high level and there continues to be an upward trend over the period for which data is available.

## 3. Drug death definitions

Classifying a death as drug related is complex. There are a number of different definitions of drug deaths, and this report focusses on two:

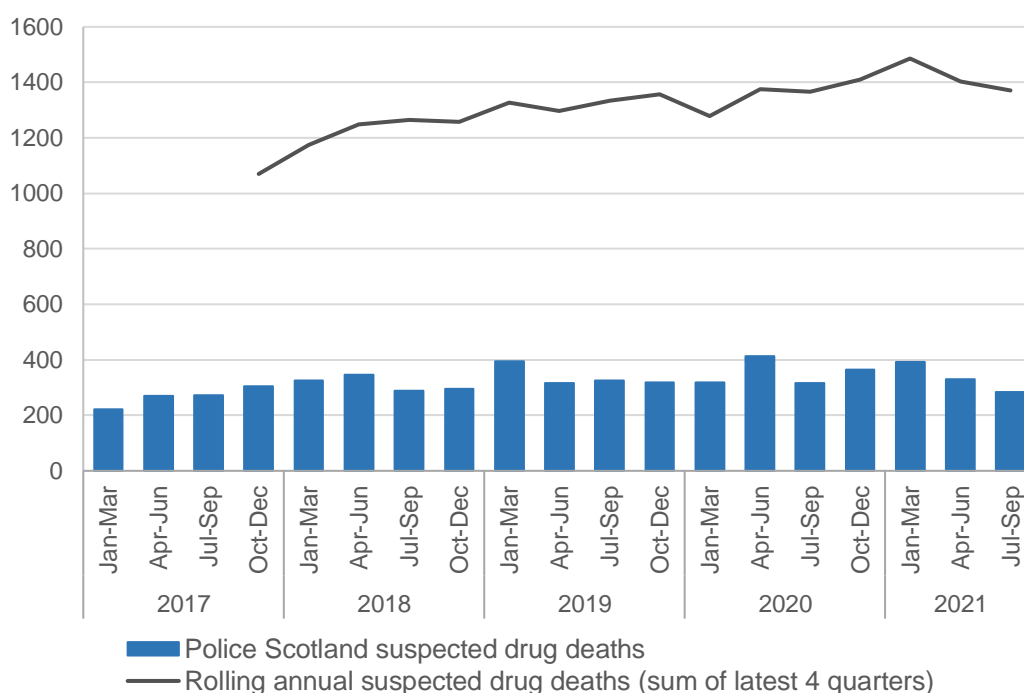
- Annual drug-related deaths (sometimes referred to as drug-misuse deaths) from National Records of Scotland (NRS) – this is the annual headline measure used in Scotland. NRS's National Statistics '[Drug-related deaths in Scotland](#)' use this definition, with the most recent publication (July 2021) reporting 1,339 drug-related deaths for 2020. 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. aspirin or paracetamol are excluded.
- Quarterly suspected drug deaths – the operational measure used by Police Scotland, this includes deaths that the Police suspect involve illicit drugs based on the reports of attending officers' observations and initial enquiries at the scene of death.

More information on National Statistics drug deaths definitions can be found within the official drug-related deaths publication on the [National Records of Scotland webpage](#).

#### 4. Recent trends in Police Scotland suspected drug deaths

Police Scotland management information gives an indication of recent trends in drug deaths in Scotland based on 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.

Figure 1: Number of Police Scotland suspected drug deaths by calendar year quarter (Scotland, January 2017 to September 2021)



Source: Police Scotland

The number of suspected drug deaths during the first nine months of 2021 was 1,007, a slight fall on the first nine months of 2020 where 1,047 suspected drug deaths were recorded. While suspected drug deaths have fallen for two consecutive quarters in 2021, there continues to be a general upward trend over the period for which data is available.

During the first nine months of 2021:

- There were 1,007 suspected drug deaths, 4% (40) fewer than during the first nine months of 2020.
- Males accounted for 72% of suspected drug deaths. This compares with 74% during the first nine months of 2020.
- There were 281 suspected drug deaths of females, an increase of 5% (14) compared with the first nine months of 2020.

- Just over two thirds (69%) of suspected drug deaths were of people aged between 35 and 54.
- There were 51 suspected drug deaths in the under 25 age group, 27% (19) fewer than during the first nine months of 2020.
- The Police Divisions with the greatest number of suspected drug deaths were Greater Glasgow (265), Lanarkshire (98), Edinburgh City (86) and North East (86).

For quarter 3, July to September 2021:

- There were 285 suspected drug deaths, 13% (44) fewer than the previous calendar quarter (April to June 2021), and 10% (31) fewer than during the same calendar quarter in the previous year (July to September 2020).

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

For the rolling 12 month period, i.e., adding the most recent four quarters together:

- There were 1,371 suspected drug deaths over the 12 months to September 2021.
- This is 2% (31) fewer than the 12 months to June 2021, but is the fifth highest number recorded in any rolling 12 month period during the timeframe for which data is available.

A breakdown of suspected drug deaths by police division by calendar quarter for the period January 2020 to September 2021 can be found in Annex A.

More detail on the statistics presented above is available in the [workbook provided here](#).

## 5. Other sources of drug deaths information in Scotland

### 5.1 Drug death data

There are two different sets of statistics on the number of drug deaths in Scotland:

- i. **National Statistics published annually by National Records of Scotland.**  
These are the official figures on the number of drug-related deaths registered in Scotland each year. Drug-related deaths are identified using data from death registration records supplemented with information from the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and forensic pathologists. '[Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2020](#)' includes more detail on the sources of data used to produce these National Statistics.
- ii. **Management information from Police Scotland on suspected drug deaths.**  
This operational data is available more rapidly and more frequently than the NRS annual statistics described at (i) and provides a more timely indication of

the likely trend in drug-related deaths. However, this management information is not subject to the same level of validation and quality assurance as National Statistics as it is based on officers' observations and other circumstantial evidence, and it is not a replacement for the final drug-related death statistics produced by NRS. Section 5.3 of this report, "Relationship between Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug-related deaths", has more detail on how this data correlates with the National Statistics produced by NRS.

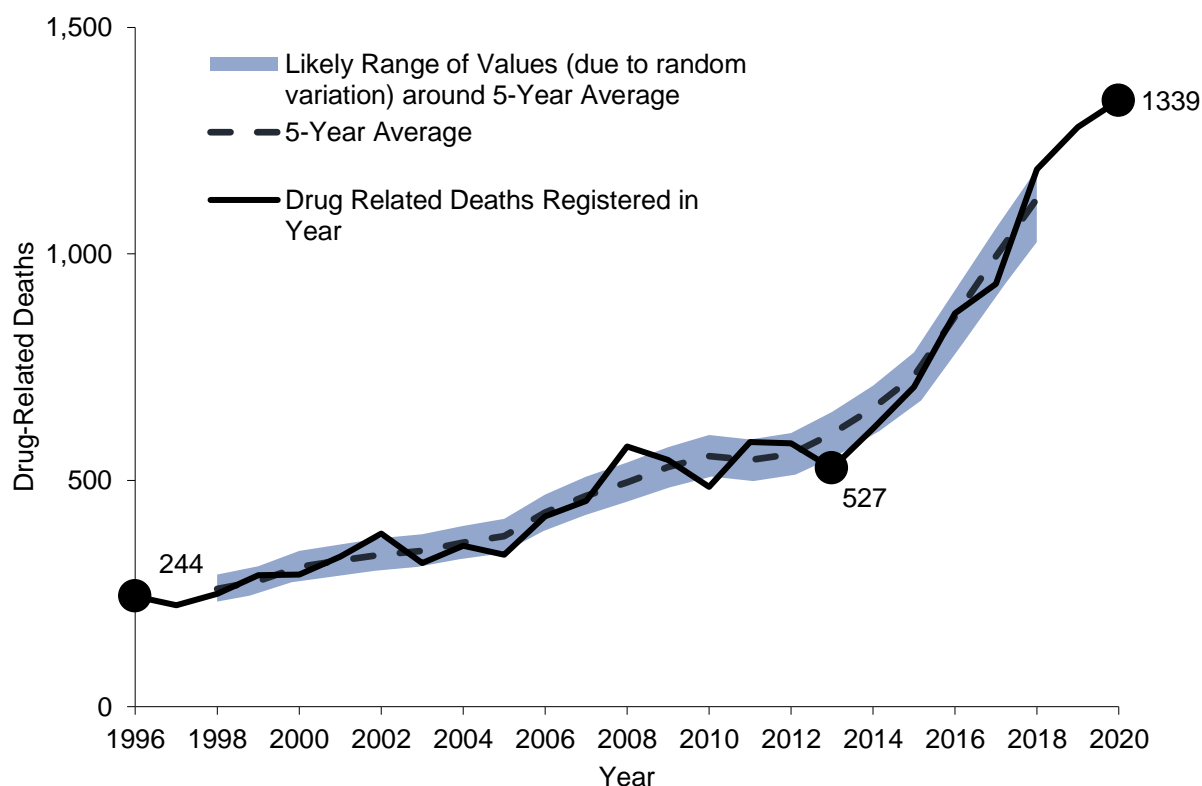
More information on the data sources, methodologies and interpretation of the data can be found in Annex B.

## 5.2 NRS National Statistics - Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2020

On 30 July 2021 National Records of Scotland published '[Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2020](#)'. These official statistics are used in the development of policy by the Scottish Government and other interested parties such as the Drug Deaths Taskforce, NHS Boards and local Alcohol and Drug Partnerships.

In 2020, there were 1,339 drug-related deaths registered in Scotland, 5% (59 deaths) more than in 2019. This was the largest number ever recorded since the series began in 1996. Drug-related deaths have been increasing since 1996 but since 2013 the upward trend has been steeper.

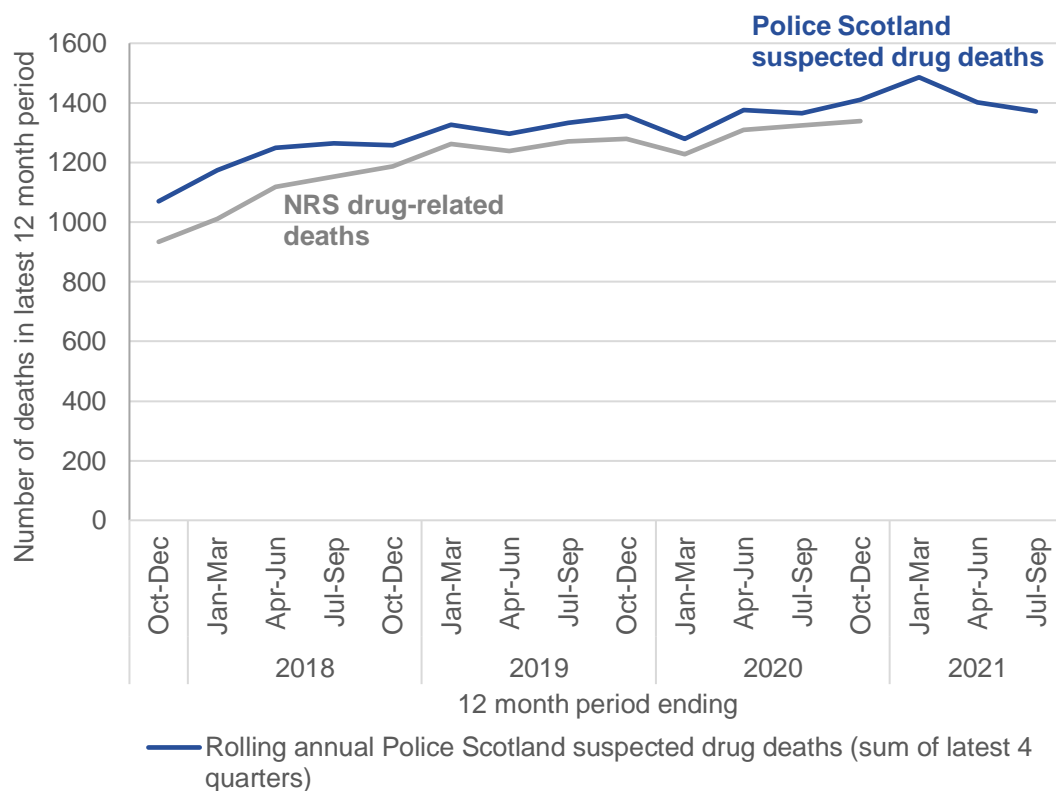
Figure 2: Number of drug-related deaths in Scotland, 1996 to 2020



Source: National Records of Scotland

### 5.3 Relationship between Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug-related deaths

Figure 3: Comparison of Police Scotland suspected drug deaths with NRS drug-related deaths



Source: National Records of Scotland and Police Scotland

The Police Scotland suspected drug deaths correlate very closely with the NRS drug-related death statistics. Since the period ending in December 2018, the rolling 12-month Police Scotland figures have ranged between 3% and 6% above the NRS drug-related death figures.

The table below shows both of the measures for calendar years 2018, 2019 and 2020:

Table 1: Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug-related deaths, 2018 to 2020

	2018	2019	2020
Police Scotland suspected drug deaths	1,257	1,356	1,411
NRS drug-related deaths	1,187	1,280	1,339
<i>Percentage difference between NRS and Police Scotland figures</i>	6%	6%	5%

Source: NRS and Police Scotland

More information on the data sources, methodologies and interpretation of the data can be found in Annex B.

## **6. Next update**

The next 'Suspected drug deaths in Scotland' quarterly report will be published in March 2022, reporting on deaths up to December 2021.

The next annual drug-related deaths publication from NRS is due to be released in Summer 2022.

## **7. 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 Drugs Forum](#)
- [Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol & Drugs](#)
- [Know the Score](#)
- [We Are With You](#)

## **8. Other drug death data and resources**

- [Drug-related deaths in Scotland in 2020 \(National Records of Scotland\)](#)
- [Substance use data and intelligence \(Public Health Scotland\)](#)
- [ScotPHO drugs pages \(Scottish Public Health Observatory\)](#)
- [Homeless deaths 2019 \(National Records of Scotland\)](#)
- [UK drug situation: Focal Point annual report](#)

## Annex A: Police Scotland suspected drug deaths by police division

Table 2: Police Scotland suspected drug deaths by police division by calendar quarter, April 2020 to September 2021

Police Division	Apr to Jun 2020	Jul to Sep 2020	Oct to Dec 2020	Jan to Mar 2021	Apr to Jun 2021	Jul to Sep 2021
A: North East	25	18	24	33	26	27
C: Forth Valley	32	20	22	17	19	11
D: Tayside	42	15	31	30	34	17
E: Edinburgh City	19	16	23	40	24	22
G: Greater Glasgow	111	82	103	92	95	78
J: The Lothians & Scottish Borders	20	19	24	31	17	23
K: Renfrewshire and Inverclyde	30	27	23	19	16	7
L: Argyll & West Dunbartonshire	10	13	10	15	5	9
N: Highlands & Islands	8	11	16	10	15	9
P: Fife	21	26	14	18	13	21
Q: Lanarkshire	53	38	36	38	29	31
U: Ayrshire	31	25	32	35	25	18
V: Dumfries & Galloway	11	6	6	15	11	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>364</b>	<b>393</b>	<b>329</b>	<b>285</b>

Source: Police Scotland

## **Annex B: Additional information on data sources & methodology**

### **Police Scotland 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.

### **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.

The 'Relationship between Police Scotland suspected drug deaths and NRS drug-related deaths' section of this report explains how the Police Scotland MI used here correlates with the National Statistics produced by NRS.

**NRS drug-related deaths**

Full details of the data and methodology underlying NRS's drug-related death statistics can be found in the NRS ['Drug-related deaths in Scotland 2020 – Methodological Annexes'](#).

### **Management Information**

The Police Scotland statistics shown here are management information and should not be considered as National or Official Statistics.

We welcome any feedback on the development of these statistics using the contact details below.

### **Correspondence and enquiries**

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### **How to access background or source data**

The Police Scotland suspected drug deaths data collected for this 'Management Information' Statistics Release has been made available in a [separate Excel workbook](#) alongside this report.



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The Scottish Government  
St Andrew's House  
Edinburgh  
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ISBN: 978-1-80201-726-7 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, December 2021

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA  
PPDAS953566 (12/21)

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