









FIRST TIME ENTRANTS TO THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN NORTHERN IRELAND 2020-21

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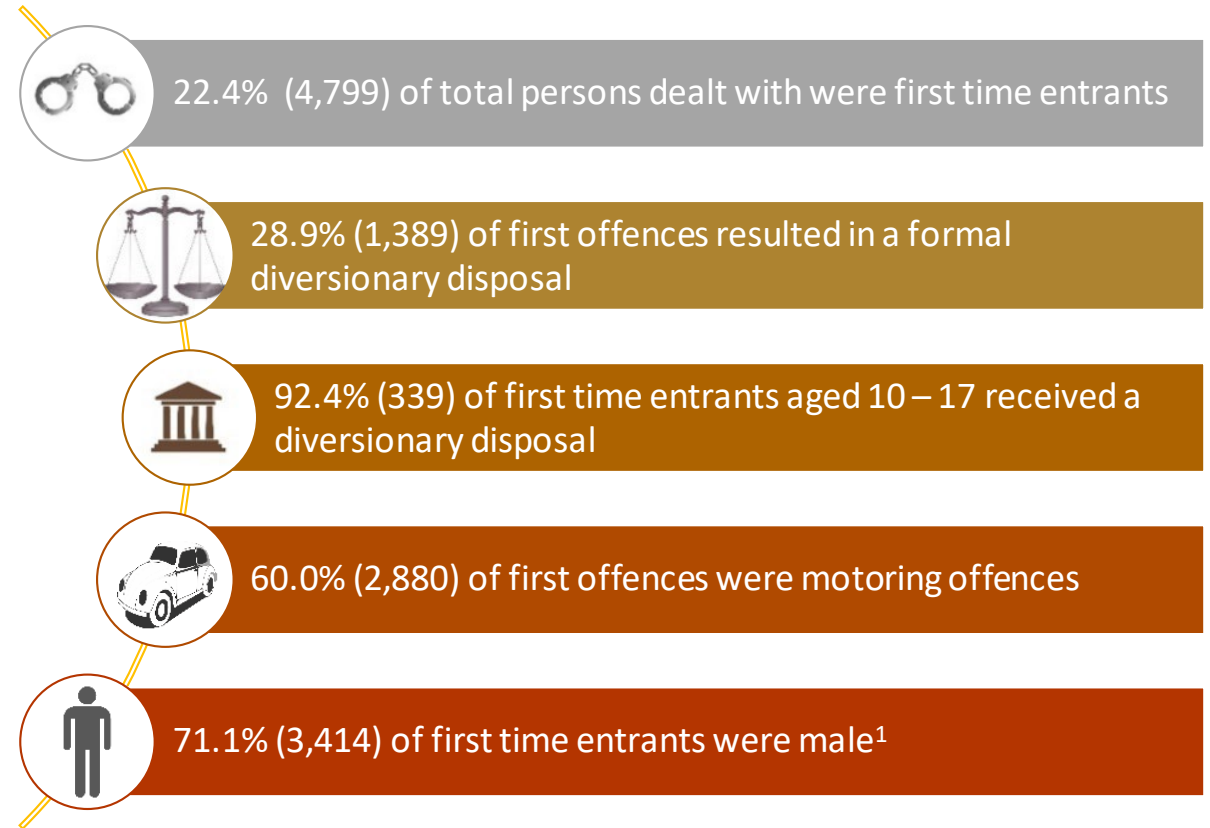
1 | Key Findings

1.1 About this bulletin

This bulletin presents information on first time entrants to the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. As well as details on demographic makeup, the bulletin also presents analysis on disposals received (see Interpreting the Data section in Appendix 1).

Completion of cases in the justice system in 2020/21 was severely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and this is reflected in the numbers recorded in this bulletin.

Main Points in 2020/21



¹ Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified.

1 | Key Findings

1.2 Overall

- In 2020/21, 21,437 offences were recorded as dealt with by conviction or diversion in the justice system in Northern Ireland. Of these, 22.4% (4,799) were first offences. The comparative figure for 2019/20 was 26.8%.
- Of first offences, 28.9% (1,389) were dealt with by formal diversionary disposal and 71.1% (3,410) by conviction.

1.3 Age Group and Gender

- Of all first time entrants in 2020/21, 7.6% (367) were aged 10 to 17 and 28.8% (1,382) were aged 18 to 24.
- Those aged 10 to 17 were most likely (92.4%, 339 out of 367) to receive a diversion for a first offence. 71.7% (200) first time entrants aged 60 and over received a conviction.
- Of all offences committed by males¹ and dealt with by conviction or diversion, 19.4% (3,414) were first offences; the comparative figure for females was 35.8% (1,385).

1.4 Offence Type and Disposals Received

- Over half, 60.0% (2,880) of all first offences in 2020/21 were motoring offences. Of all instances where a conviction or diversion was issued for offences in that category, 34.9% were for first offences.
- Monetary disposals made up 60.4% (2,900) of all disposals for first offences in 2020/21. First offences accounted for 29.2% of all instances where a monetary penalty was imposed in relation to a conviction or diversion. Of all instances where imprisonment was imposed as a penalty, first offences accounted for only 2.7% (67 out of 2,491).
- First offences accounted for 44.7% (1,389) of all instances where a diversionary disposal was issued. . Of first offences dealt with by diversion, 76.3% (1,060) were dealt with by way of caution. However, while 44.7% of all cautions were for first offences, 73.1% (190) of all informed warnings issued were for first offences.

¹ Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified, due to the small numbers involved.

2 | Introduction

2.1 About this report

In the 2011-16 Programme for Government, the Minister outlined a commitment to reduce the level of serious crime by reshaping the approach used to tackle factors leading to criminal behaviours within Northern Ireland. A commitment was given to monitor the number of young people entering the criminal justice system for the first time.

This bulletin, produced in accordance with the pillars and principles set out in the Code of Practice for Statistics, presents data on first time entrants to the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland for the year 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. It provides an overview of the structure of the known offending population in 2020/21, along with information on the breakdown of offences committed by new offenders and the disposals received. Comparative information with the previous year is also provided.

Details of methodology, data coverage and quality are detailed in Appendix 1.

Data in all tables and charts in the bulletin, along with supplementary data, are available from the Department of Justice website in the accompanying [spreadsheet](#). The next update covering the 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 will be published in July 2023. A full [publication schedule](#) is available on the Department of Justice website.

The data underpinning this report are sourced from those compiled in the production of an annual Prosecution, Convictions and Out of Court Disposals report, taking data on convictions and out of court diversionary disposals each year and merging it with a historical disposals file. As the Prosecutions bulletin is produced on a calendar year basis, the publication of first time entrants data is delayed until publication of prosecutions data for the entire period to be reported on has been completed.

3 Overall

3.1 Total offences

In 2020/21, 21,437 (first and further) offences were recorded as dealt with by conviction or diversion in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, fewer than the total number (29,053) in the previous year. This drop in cases completed reflects the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the workings of the justice system in 2020/21, when court sittings were suspended for a period and the justice system as a whole did not operate at its full capacity.

3.2 First time entrants

Of total offences, 4,799 (22.4%) were first and 16,638 (77.6%) were further offences. As detailed in the counting rules in Appendix 1, the number of first offences equates directly to the number of first time entrants to the justice system. The number of first time entrants (first offences) in 2020/21 therefore was 4,799 (22.4% of all offences), a reduction of 4.4% percentage points on the previous year (7,805 first offences; 26.8% of all offences). Over the last ten years the proportion of first time entrants has fallen from 31.8% in 2011/12 to 22.4% in 2020/21 (Table 1).

Table 1: First time entrants to the justice system as percentage of all offenders dealt with at court or by formal diversionary disposal 2011/12 to 2020/21

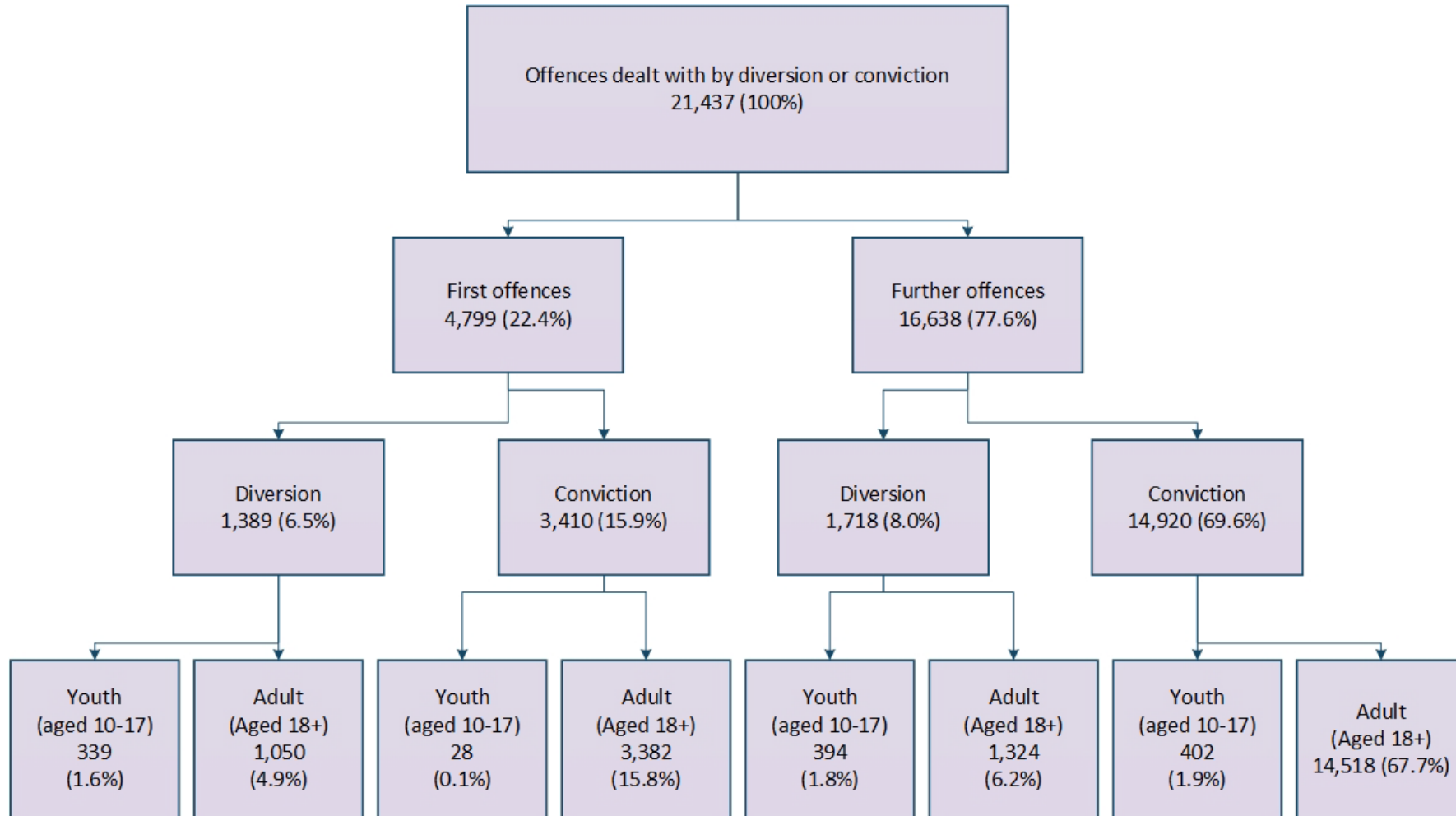
| Year | Percentage first time offenders |
|---------|---------------------------------|
| 2011/12 | 31.8 |
| 2012/13 | 31.2 |
| 2013/14 | 31.7 |
| 2014/15 | 30.4 |
| 2015/16 | 30.4 |
| 2016/17 | 29.8 |
| 2017/18 | 29.3 |
| 2018/19 | 27.2 |
| 2019/20 | 26.8 |
| 2020/21 | 22.4 |

3.3 Conviction and diversion breakdown

Of all offences, 14.5% (3,107) were dealt with by diversion, and 85.5% (18,330) by conviction. Corresponding figures for all first offences were 28.9% (1,389) and 71.1% (3,410) respectively.

3 | Overall

Figure 1: First offences and further offences of all offenders [see note below]



[Note] The percentages shown in the diagram relate to the total number of offences committed in the top box in the figure.

4 Age Breakdown

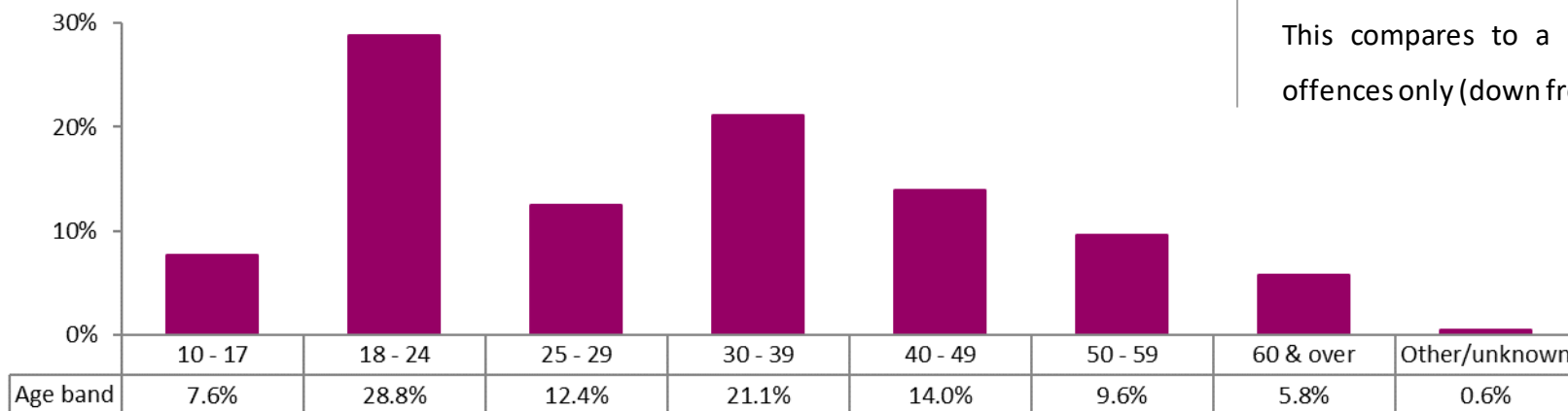
4.1 Young people overall

In 2020/21, young people aged 10-17 committed 7.6% of all first offences (367 out of 4,799 first offences) and 4.8% of all further offences (796 out of 16,638 further offences). Of all proven convictions and diversions for this age group, 31.6% (367) were first offences.

4.2 Young people convictions and diversions

At an overall level, 10-17 year olds received 23.6% (733) of all diversionary disposals and 2.3% (430) of all convictions. Looking only at disposals for first offences, they accounted for almost a quarter (24.4%; 339) of all diversions and just under one percent (0.8%; 28) of all convictions (Tables 1a, 1c and 1d in accompanying spreadsheet).

Figure 2: First offences by age band



4.3 Adult first offences

In 2020/21, 1,382 (28.8%) first offences were by those aged 18 to 24, 31.7% (438) of which were dealt with by way of diversion; 47.9% of all diversions for this age group were for first offences.

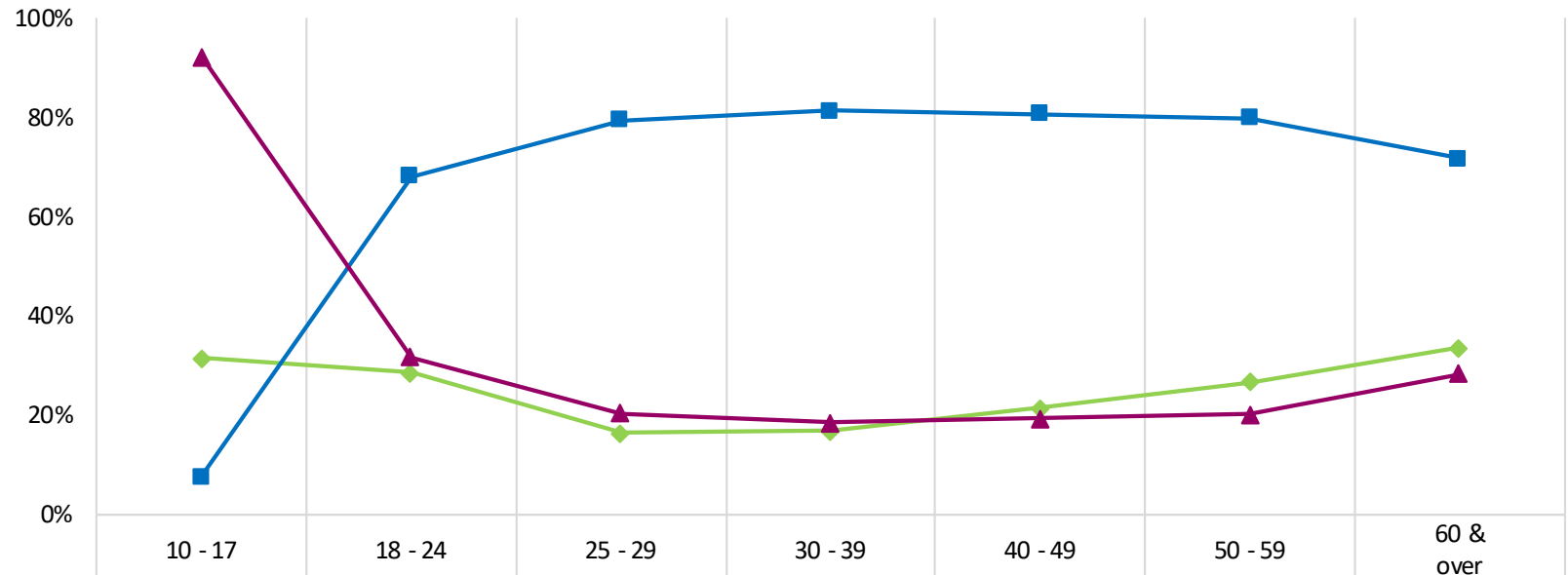
While 29.2% (200) of convictions for those aged 60 and over were for first offences, only 5.9% of all convictions for first offences were attributable to this group (Tables 1c and 1d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

4.4 First convictions

The rate of first convictions in 2020/21, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 26.2% (4,808) overall (compared with 26.5% in 2019/20). This compares to a rate of 18.6% (3,410) for convictions for first offences only (down from 22.3% in 2019/20).

4 | Age Breakdown

Figure 3: First offences as percentage of first/all convictions and diversions by age band



| | | | | | | | |
|---|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| ◆ first offences as % of all disposals (convictions and diversions) | 31.6% | 28.5% | 16.4% | 16.8% | 21.5% | 26.6% | 33.7% |
| ■ convictions for first offences as % of all disposals for first offences | 7.6% | 68.3% | 79.6% | 81.5% | 80.7% | 79.9% | 71.7% |
| ▲ diversions for first offences as % of all disposals for first offences | 92.4% | 31.7% | 20.4% | 18.5% | 19.3% | 20.1% | 28.3% |

5 | Gender Breakdown

5.1 First offences overall

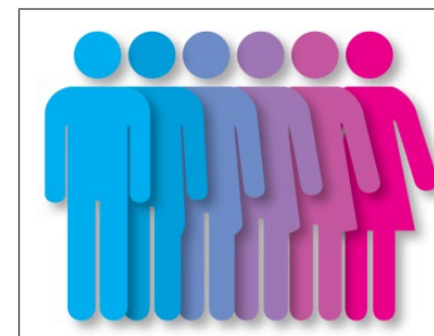
Of all offences committed by males¹ and dealt with by conviction or diversion in 2020/21, 19.4% (3,414) were first offences; the comparative figure for females was 35.8% (1,385). Of all first offences, 71.1% had been committed by males and 28.9% by females (Table 2a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

5.2 Male conviction and diversion breakdown

In 2020/21, 42.2% (985) of all diversions and 16.0% (2,429) of all convictions handed down to males were for first offences. The rate of first convictions, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 23.3% (3,551) for males (Tables 2b, 2c and 2d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

5.3 Female conviction and diversion breakdown

For females, 52.4% (404) of all diversions and 31.6% (981) of all convictions were for first offences. The rate of first convictions in 2020/21, whether or not it was for a first offence, was 40.5% (1,257) for females (Tables 2b, 2c and 2d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).



¹ Figures for Males also include organisations, transgender and gender not specified, due to the small numbers involved.

6 | Offence Category

6.1 Overall

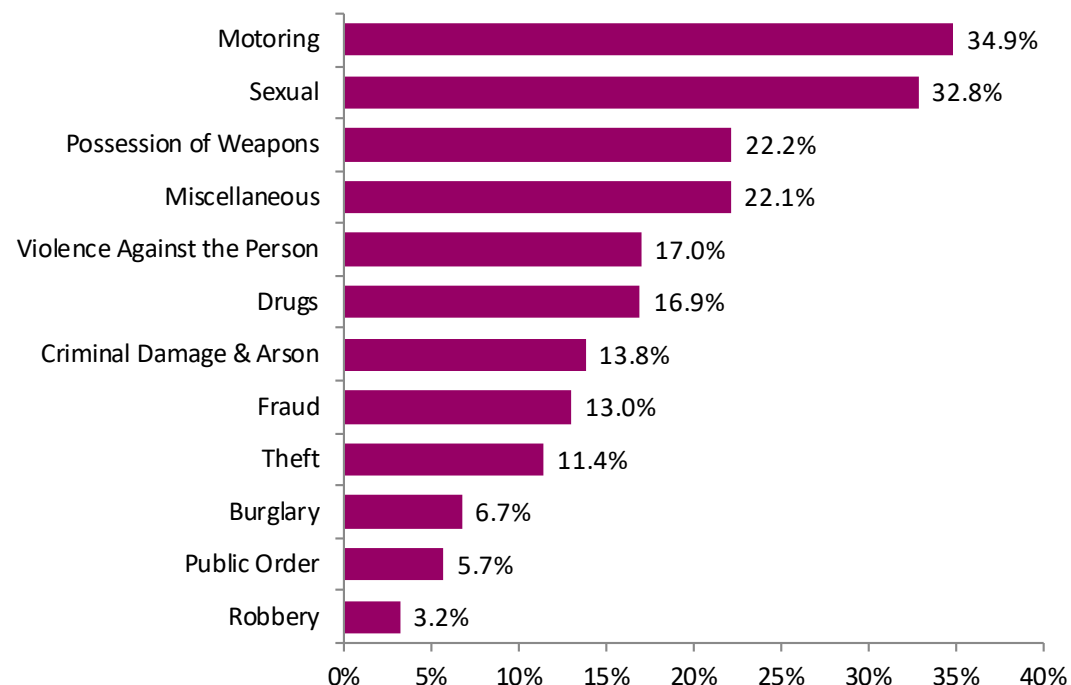
Of all first offences dealt with by way of diversion or conviction, 60.0% (2,880) were for motoring offences, 13.1% (629) for violence against the person (VAP), 9.7% (467) for drugs and 3.9% each for theft (186) and criminal damage and arson (185) (Figure 4; Table 3a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

In 2020/21, motoring (34.9%, 2,880), sexual (32.8%, 45), possession of weapons (22.2%, 71) and offences in the miscellaneous crimes against society category (22.1%, 163) were the offence classifications where first offences made up the largest proportion of the total convictions and diversions. Burglary (6.7%), publicorder (5.7%, 109 cases) and robbery (less than 3 cases) were the lowest (Figure 5; Table 3a in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

6.2 Conviction and diversion breakdown

The offence categories where first offences were dealt with mainly by diversion in 2020/21 were possession of weapons (74.6%, 53), drugs (73.4%, 343), criminal damage & arson (71.9%, 133), theft (60.2%, 112), burglary (57.9%, 11), publicorder (57.8%, 63) and VAP (56.8%, 357). Conversely, first offences in the motoring (92.2%, 2,656), sexual (80.0%, 36), fraud (70.5%, 31) and miscellaneous crimes against society (56.4%, 92) categories were mostly dealt with by conviction (Table 3e in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 4: First offences as percentage of all convictions and diversions by offence classification



7 Disposal Type

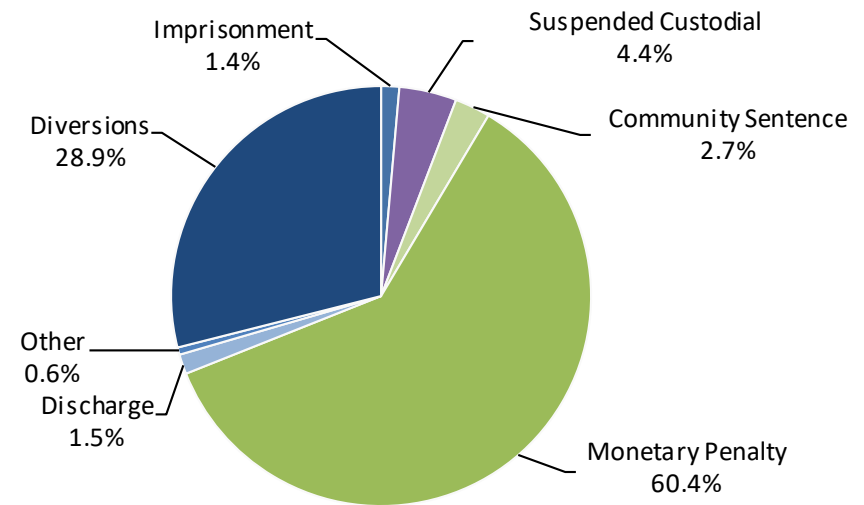
7.1 Diversions

Diversions accounted for 14.5% of all disposals in 2020/21, whether for first or further offences. In terms of all first offences, 28.9% (1,389) were dealt with by diversions, similar to the previous year (28.8%; 2,244).

Most first offences dealt with by diversion, were dealt with by way of caution (76.3%, 1,060). Informed warnings (13.7%, 190) and PPS ordered youth conference plans (9.9%, 138) accounted for substantially smaller proportions.

First offences made up 73.1% (190 out of 260) of all informed warnings issued. This compares to 44.7% (1,060 out of 2,370) of cautions and 29.0% (138 out of 476) of PPS ordered youth conference plans (Table 4d in accompanying [spreadsheet](#)).

Figure 5: First offences by disposal type



7.2 Other disposal types

Monetary penalties were imposed for 60.4% (2,900) of all first offences. Suspended custodial disposals, community sentences and imprisonment were imposed in relation to a further 4.4%, 2.7% and 1.4% respectively. First offences accounted for 29.2% of those receiving a monetary penalty upon conviction, less than the 33.0% recorded in 2019/20. The corresponding figures for 2020/21 for suspended custodial disposals, community sentences and imprisonment were 6.5%, 6.6% and 2.7% respectively.

8 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Who are first time entrants to the criminal justice system?

Within this publication, first time entrants to the criminal justice system are those who are recorded as having committed a proven first offence, whether it was dealt with by way of diversionary disposal or by conviction. The term ‘first time entrants’ equates directly to that of ‘first offence’, the phraseology used to describe data presented within this document. In order to calculate the proportion of first time entrants, information is also provided for ‘further offences’. Note that, under counting rules for this publication, ‘further offences’ do not relate directly to the number of offenders who have committed further offences, as an offender may have had more than one further conviction or diversionary disposal within the time period covered by the report.

What counts as a first or further offence?

An offence is defined as a ‘first offence’ if it results in the offender receiving their first diversion, warning, caution or conviction – i.e. they have no previous criminal record in Northern Ireland. Offences resulting in further diversions, warnings, cautions or convictions are known as ‘further offences’, since the offender already has a recorded criminal history.

Where an offender has had a diversion imposed, been warned, cautioned or convicted of several offences on the same occasion, only one offence, the principal offence, is counted (whether this is in relation to a first offence or, for the purposes of this bulletin, to a further offence). The basis for selection of the principal offence is laid down in rules issued by the Home Office; the Department of Justice has developed a [methodology](#) applicable to Northern Ireland based on these.

Out of court disposals not taken into account in this bulletin are Penalty Notices for Disorder (PNDs). PNDs are a fixed penalty designed to tackle low-level, anti-social and nuisance offending for offenders aged 18 and over and are issued for a range of minor offences. They were introduced in Northern Ireland on the 6th June 2012 as a result of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. PNDs provide police with a swift financial punishment to deal with misbehaviour and a practical deterrent to future re-offending. However, they do not require an admission of guilt and do not form part of an individual’s criminal record. Further information on PNDs can be accessed at the [nidirect](#) website.

8 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Data source and coverage

The statistics are produced using administrative data sourced from the Causeway Data Sharing Mechanism (DSM1). They were extracted primarily based on records contained on the Criminal Records Viewer (CRV), held on Causeway. CRV utilises data that originated in the PSNI, PPS and from Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service. Causeway is an interconnected information system, launched as a joint undertaking by the Criminal Justice Organisations in Northern Ireland. The information is not a sample, but a complete dataset of all relevant cases recorded within the time period reported on. As part of the preparation of the figures for the bulletin, numerous validation checks are carried out by the NISRA statisticians responsible for production of the bulletin, to ensure the data are fit for purpose.

Full details of data relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, user need, cost and confidentiality is available in the accompanying background quality report. Details of the data quality checks and processes that DoJ has in place are available in the Quality Assurance of Administrative Data (QAAD) document on the DoJ website.

These statistics are produced on a financial year basis, i.e. in relation to cases dealt with or completed from 1 April to 31 March each year. The data underpinning this report are sourced from those compiled in the production of an annual Prosecution, Convictions and Out of Court Disposals report, taking data on convictions and out of court diversionary disposals each year and merging it with a historical disposals file. As the Prosecutions bulletin is produced on a calendar year basis, the publication of first time entrants data is delayed until publication of prosecutions data for the entire period to be reported on has been completed. Further, this allows for efficient sequencing of work by the small team that prepare these statistics, as they are also responsible for producing statistics on Case Processing Time Statistics and Youth Engagement statistics in Northern Ireland.

Full details of data relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility, coherence, strengths, weaknesses, user need, cost and confidentiality are available in the [accompanying background quality](#) report. Details of the data quality checks and processes that DoJ has in place are available in the [Quality Assurance of Administrative Data \(QAAD\)](#) document on the DoJ website. A summary of the strength and weaknesses of the data are included on the following page.

8 | Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Data strengths and limitations

Strengths

- Causeway is an integrated messaging system specifically designed to support information sharing between the five main NI Criminal Justice organisations. The information recorded within the individual organisations is used to manage day to day business and to communicate between the other organisations so needs to be highly accurate.
- The system works well and is trusted by the staff who use it. It is reliable and needs minimal maintenance.
- A number of key personnel are involved in managing Causeway and have developed a high level of competence and experience of the system.
- The data are sourced from an administrative data system and therefore are a complete record of all cases (i.e. are not based on a sample of staff).
- Processes and systems have been developed and refined over the years to address any quality concerns that emerged and the statisticians have developed a complex and detailed series of validation checks which are applied to the data to ensure any anomalies are corrected.

Limitations

- The system depends on staff within five separate Criminal Justice organisations inputting details and updating records on their own systems. While there is the potential for problems to occur if details aren't updated on a timely basis or if input errors occur, the nature of the information make accuracy critical.

8 Appendix 1 – Methodology and Counting Rules

Interpreting the data

Figures for first time entrants to the justice system in Northern Ireland, as reported in this bulletin, are based on those who have had a conviction at any time since 1960 and those who had either a conviction or a diversionary disposal since the implementation of the Causeway system DSM1 in December 2009. This means that the reported rate of first offences may be slightly higher than the actuality, as, in some cases, first offences would have been dealt with by means of diversionary disposal, information on which is not available prior to the introduction of DSM1. However, any likely impact of this statistical effect should lessen with the passing of time.

In this publication, first offences dealt with by conviction are distinct from those instances counted as a first conviction. This is because an individual receiving a first conviction may have previously been dealt with within the justice system by way of diversion. The following table compares first offences where a conviction has been imposed in 2020/21 with those cases of first convictions where diversions previously received have not been taken into consideration. The difference between the two rates is explained by the inclusion of diversions information for those cases where a diversion was an offender's first true contact with the justice system.

First convictions and first offences dealt with by conviction 2020-21

| First convictions | First offence dealt with by conviction | All convictions | First convictions as percentage of all convictions | First offences as percentage of all convictions |
|--------------------------|---|------------------------|---|--|
| 4,808 | 3,410 | 18,330 | 26.2% | 18.6% |