

## DATA INSIGHTS

# Using data to examine law enforcement's use of controlled delivery for illegal drug parcels.

Author: Ana Morales-Gomez | [Ana.Morales@ed.ac.uk](mailto:Ana.Morales@ed.ac.uk)

Date: February 2021

DOI: [10.7488/era/773](https://doi.org/10.7488/era/773)

## WHAT WE DID

Widespread access to the internet has increased our ability to buy almost anything, including illegal drugs. Every day, drugs are purchased online and delivered through postal systems all over the world, including the UK. When drug consignments are intercepted and confiscated by UK Border Force, a decision may be taken by the National Crime Agency and police forces to conduct a 'controlled delivery' in order to launch a prosecution or investigation against the drug purchaser and, in so doing, reduce the social harms of drug consumption within communities.

Using data from the National Crime Agency on drug parcels intercepted en route to Scotland between 2011 and 2016, this project aimed to examine which parcels were most likely to be selected for a controlled delivery and what types of harm were associated with these parcels. Specifically, we examined factors relating to the level of harm posed by the parcel itself (in terms of the type and amount of drugs it contained) and factors relating to the level of drug-related harm in the communities to which the parcels were destined. We found that potential harms relating to the amount and type of drugs contained in parcels was associated with an increased likelihood of selection for controlled delivery by law enforcement agencies, but wider community level harms were not.

This research contributes to a better understanding of how illegal drug consignments intercepted by UK Border Force, result in a controlled delivery in Scotland and what factors are associated with that. It suggests that, in addition to considering the potential harms of individual drugs parcels, law enforcement agencies could pay greater attention to the potential drug-related harms of the communities to which they are destined.

## WHAT WE FOUND

We found that the likelihood of a parcel being selected for a controlled delivery was strongly associated with the size of the intercepted drugs parcel (i.e. the amount of drugs contained). This suggests that the decision to pursue a prosecution is likely to be driven to large extent by the perceived risk that the drug purchaser is involved in drug selling, dealing or wholesale distribution. Thus, a primary consideration of law enforcement is to reduce social harm by taking action against the most risky individual purchasers.

The type of drugs contained in the parcel also predicted whether or not it was selected for a controlled delivery. Parcels containing Class A and B drugs were more likely to be considered for a potential prosecution than those containing Class C drugs. This was true regardless of the size of the parcel, but was especially the case for those containing the largest quantities of drugs, as shown in Figure 1. This suggests that the degree of harm posed by the drug itself also influences the use of controlled delivery by law enforcement agencies.

Parcels containing substances that were not classified under the Misuse of Drugs Act (non-MDA) mainly included New Psychoactive Substances (such as synthetic cannabinoids, stimulants and hallucinogenic drugs) and suspected cutting agents, were also more likely to be selected for a controlled delivery than Class C drugs, even when the quantity of drugs was small. This is consistent with the level of harm that these substances were considered to pose to public health during this period in Scotland.

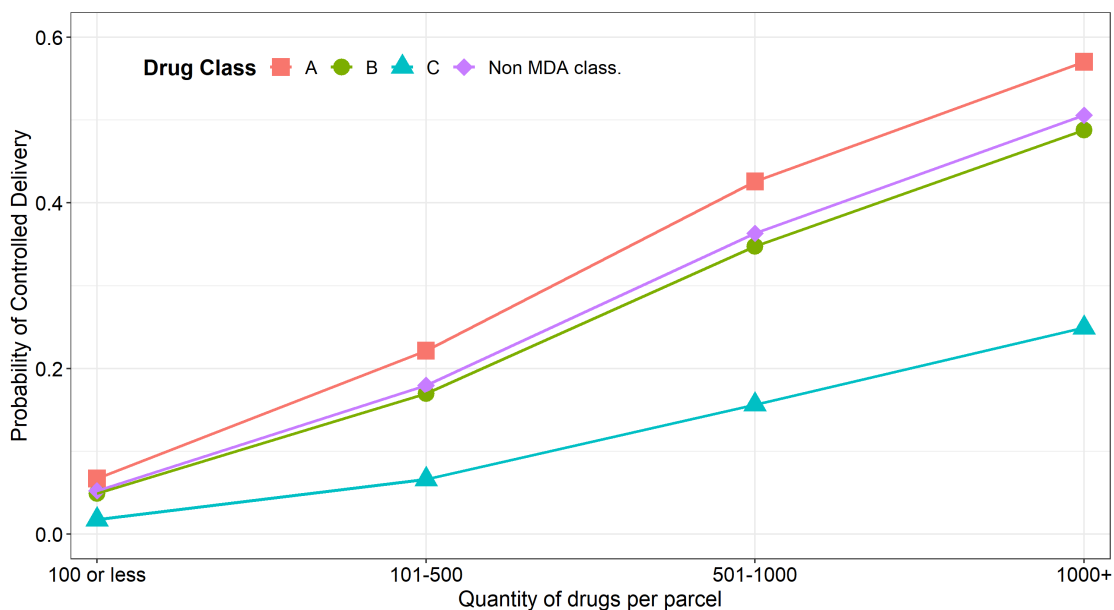


Figure 1: Predicted probability of controlled delivery by drugs MDA classification and size of the consignment

We did not find any evidence that use of controlled delivery was related to the characteristics of the community to which it was destined or the level of potential drug-related harm there, including deprivation or problematic drug use. In addition, we found that controlled deliveries were not prioritised in areas with higher than average rates of drug parcel interception (i.e. clustered patterns of drug purchasing), which may be indicative of increased drug-related harm.

These findings suggest that use of controlled delivery is influenced by information about the potential harms posed by individual drug parcels and those who purchase them, but not by wider data on drug-related problems and harms within the communities to which parcels are destined. The results of this research could help law enforcement agencies to maximise the public health value of conducting controlled delivery by demonstrating the value of consulting other relevant information when making decisions.

## WHAT WE FOUND (cont'd)

We also examined the area-specific risk of controlled deliveries across Scotland's 32 Local Authorities to determine whether there was any discrepancy in the likelihood of a parcel being subject to a controlled delivery according to where in the country it was destined for. Figure 2 shows that, even when taking account of the amount and type of drugs contained in the parcel (i.e. the offender-level harm) and the drug-related vulnerabilities of the local area (i.e. the community-level harm), there were substantial differences in the likelihood of an offender being subject to an attempted prosecution in different parts of the country.

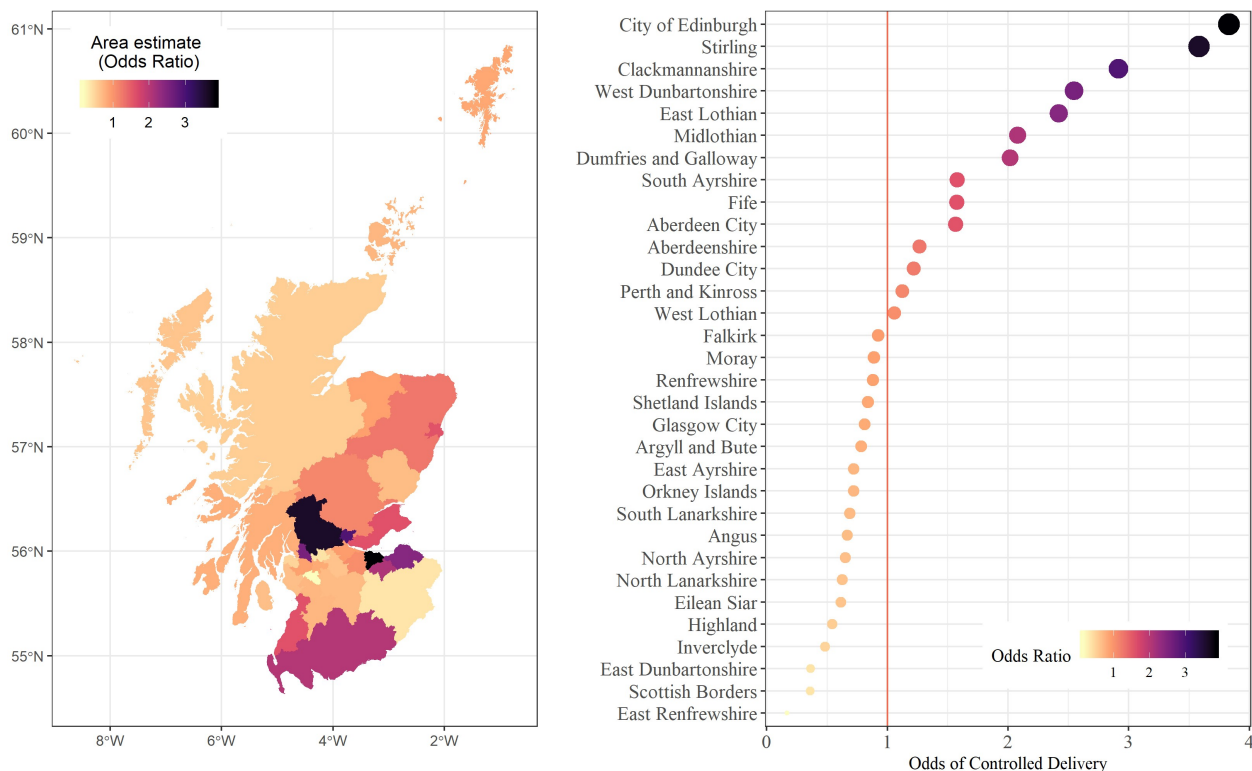


Figure 2: Adjusted Local Authority specific risk of controlled delivery

The darker colours of the map in Figure 2 show that controlled deliveries were concentrated in some urban Local Authorities around the central belt and the east of Scotland as well as in the south west and north east of Scotland. The graph to the right of the map shows that illegal drug consignments destined for the cities of Edinburgh and Stirling were almost 4 times more likely to be subject to a controlled delivery than in parcels destined for other local authorities, such as the Highlands and the Western Isles, even though the level of online drug purchases is known to be higher than average and drug-related deaths among problematic drug users is at its highest in Scotland in these northern-most Local Authorities.

The fact that these spatial differences in the use of controlled deliveries for drugs purchased over the internet cannot be explained by the nature of the parcel itself or the level of deprivation, crime or common measures of drug-related harm across the Local authorities, suggests that there must be unexplained factors at the local level that determine law enforcement decision making. Nevertheless, these findings could indicate that opportunities are being missed to conduct controlled deliveries that would help to reduce drug-related harms in more remote and rural localities.

It should be noted that the data studied here were collected just before and after the amalgamation of the eight legacy forces into the Police Service of Scotland.

## WHY IT MATTERS

---

There is evidence that online purchase of drugs is increasing, because it offers a convenient way of acquiring illegal products while minimising the risk of detection and violence associated with the traditional offline drug markets. This means that more potentially harmful substances are flowing into communities through the postal service, with the potential to cause harm within communities.

Law enforcement activity appears to be strongly associated with the level of harm posed by individual drug packages (and, it can be inferred, their purchasers). However, it does not appear to be influenced to any degree by wider geographical factors relating to community vulnerability and problematic drug use. Moreover, clusters of smaller drug parcels arriving into areas that are already blighted by drug-related harms (including drug-related deaths) could potentially increase these levels of risk.

The UK Border Force, the National Crime Agency and UK Police Forces play a key role in protecting the public from the social and health-related harms associated with drug use. We argue that using both parcel-level and community-level data on which to inform the development of law enforcement strategies would be in line with a public health approach to reducing drug-related crime and its associated harms.

## WHAT NEXT?

---

This project has demonstrated that administrative data can be used effectively to inform and support law enforcement activities. These findings can contribute to debates about the serious problem of drug misuse in Scotland and help to inform the design of public health informed law enforcement approaches to reducing drug-related harms.

In particular, these findings highlight the need to take into consideration the specific drug-related vulnerabilities and risks within communities when making decisions about law enforcement strategies aimed at taking decisions to organise controlled deliveries of intercepted drug parcels.

Working with the NCA and Police Scotland, we aim to expand this research using more up to date data to explore the presence of drug networks using the postal system to import drugs into Scotland.

The Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research (SCADR) analyses public sector data, using new data sources and novel methodologies to deliver cutting-edge applied research with real-world impact. We work with our partners to provide evidence-based insights, which inform policy and practice for public benefit.

Data Insights is produced by the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data Research  
Website: [www.scadr.ac.uk](http://www.scadr.ac.uk) | Twitter: [@scadr\\_data](https://twitter.com/scadr_data) | Email: [scadr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:scadr@ed.ac.uk)

The centre is a multi-institutional initiative hosted at the University of Edinburgh, which is a charitable body registered in Scotland (Registration number: SC005336).

