

DATA INSIGHTS

Postal deliveries of drugs in Scotland

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WHAT WE DID

Developments in technology are making it easier to anonymously access sites on the internet, known as 'cryptomarkets', to order illegal drugs. These drugs are then delivered via standard postal services. Our work uses administrative data to give a new perspective on how drugs deliveries flow through the postal system into Scotland.

To study potential cryptomarket use within Scotland, we used administrative law enforcement data collected by the National Crime Agency (NCA) from between April 2011-January 2016.

The NCA hold information on illegal consignments of drugs and drug-related commodities intercepted by the UK Border Force (UKBF) being delivered into Scotland. This information includes the content of the intercepted packages, such as the size and type of commodity, and the destination location.

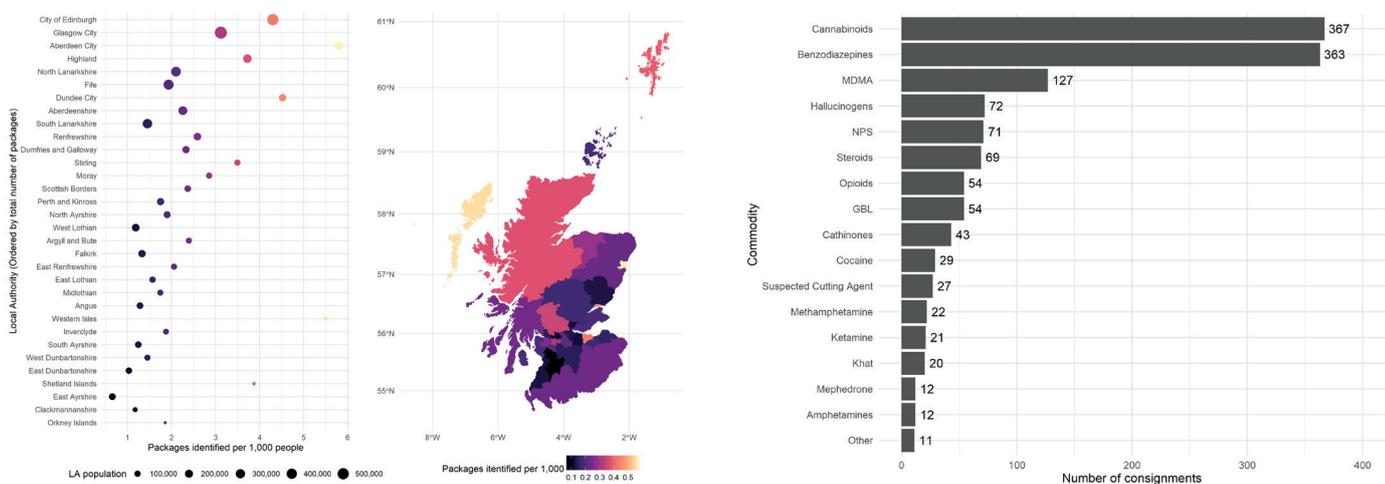
Using the NCA dataset, we set out to answer four research questions in order to provide an initial picture of the geographical distribution of these drugs packages within in Scotland:

1. Where in Scotland were drugs packages being delivered to?
2. Was drug package delivery rate higher in areas that had characteristics related to drug use?
3. Did some regions of Scotland have a higher than expected rate of drug package delivery than others, after controlling for factors related to neighbourhood-level drug use?
4. Was there additional spatial patterning to package identification – such as hotspots - even after controlling for area-level characteristics?

WHAT WE FOUND -

Geographical distribution of drug package delivery in Scotland

- 1 The rate of illegal drug deliveries was highest in Scotland's four largest urban Local Authorities and also in some of the most remote and rural Local Authorities, including the Shetland Islands, Western Isles and Highlands.
- 2 Higher rates of drug delivery through the postal system was associated with neighbourhoods that had higher levels of deprivation and higher crime rates.
- 3 The differences in drug delivery rates between Local Authorities were not just due to neighbourhoods in different parts of the country having different characteristics. We found substantial differences between Local Authorities in our model's estimated delivery rate, even after accounting for local crime rates, deprivation and levels of internet use.
- 4 Drug deliveries were typically small and were not associated with the level of drugs-related hospitalizations in an area after controlling for local crime rates, deprivation and levels of internet use.



The most commonly intercepted commodities were cannabinoids and benzodiazepines, which each represented just over a quarter of all intercepted parcels, with MDMA the third most commonly intercepted drug at 9% of all parcels. This is similar to the distribution of illegal drugs sold on popular cryptomarkets as described by Ciancaglini and colleague (2015). We are confident, therefore, that the illegal packages in the NCA dataset reflect typical cryptomarket use.

Analysis of the size, content and geographical patterning of the drugs deliveries in the NCA dataset indicates that cryptomarkets are mostly used to purchase drugs for small-scale use, such as potentially recreational or non-commercially motivated supply. However, a small proportion of consignments were larger and likely intended for wholesale use.

We compared the packages identified in the NCA data to England and Wales Sentencing Guidelines for offences related to supply. Only 544 of the 1,374 (39.6%) of the packages in the NCA dataset contained commodities that were covered by the guidelines and, of those, only 44 (8%) met the threshold to indicate they were probably wholesale consignments.

WHY IT MATTERS

The potential for cryptomarkets to change or expand drug supply routes raises significant concerns for policy makers and practitioners, especially in terms of how it might impact on communities in the UK.

Our analysis shows that the impact of cryptomarkets may vary geographically, with the potential for increased harm to at-risk populations in more isolated areas from easier or cheaper access to drugs.

As a result, the geographical distribution of support services for drug users may need to reflect changing patterns of consumption.

WHAT NEXT?

The NCA dataset has identified some initial avenues of exploration for informing law enforcement action against cryptomarkets.

Further analysis of these administrative data could examine whether drugs flowing through cryptomarkets have an impact on recorded crime rates or drugs-related hospital admissions in local communities.

It could also seek to examine whether the use of police interventions, such as 'controlled deliveries', lessen these impacts.

These data have the potential to provide valuable information on the flow of drugs ordered through cryptomarkets to policy makers in both public health and law enforcement.

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