

# The Psychoactive Substances Act Five Years On





## **A blanket ban**

**The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 (PSA) banned the sale and import of any psychoactive substance.**

**This is often referred to as a 'blanket ban' as now any mind-altering substance would either be controlled through this new law or covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.**

**Exemptions for alcohol, tobacco and nitrous oxide were allowed due to their established markets.**

**The PSA does not cover possession (unless in a custodial institution) but focuses on the supply of drugs.**



# **The Psychoactive Substances Act, Five Years On**

The emergence of new drugs on the market was most notable from 2007 onwards. These 'New Psychoactive Substances' were not covered by existing drug legislation which led to them being sold online and on street corners, in newsagents and in 'headshops' across the UK.

With little regulation and limited information about the effects and risks, widespread use of these new drugs led to significant public health harms - particularly with the use of synthetic cannabinoids and the injection of stimulant drugs by more vulnerable members of society.



# The Psychoactive Substances Act, Five Years On

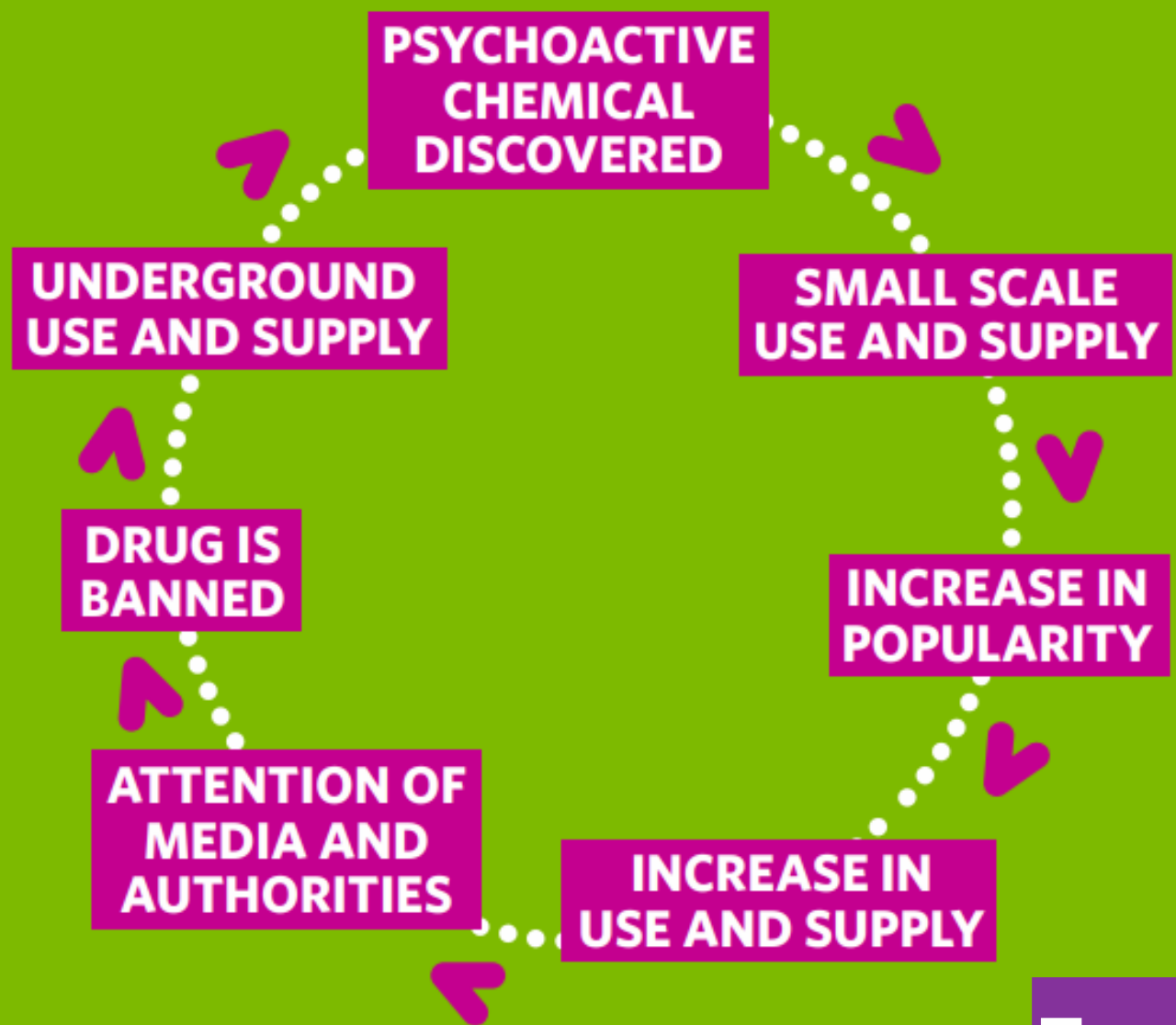
For years, the main approach to addressing the public health concerns related to these new drugs, was to bring the drug under control (i.e. add it to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971).

This led to what is often described as a 'cat and mouse game' between people manufacturing these drugs and authorities.

## A CYCLE OF NEW DRUGS

Previously drugs generally followed a cycle of creation, supply and prohibition.

On the 26th of May 2016 the UK Government introduced the Psychoactive Substances Act which fundamentally alters the way we legislate against drugs.

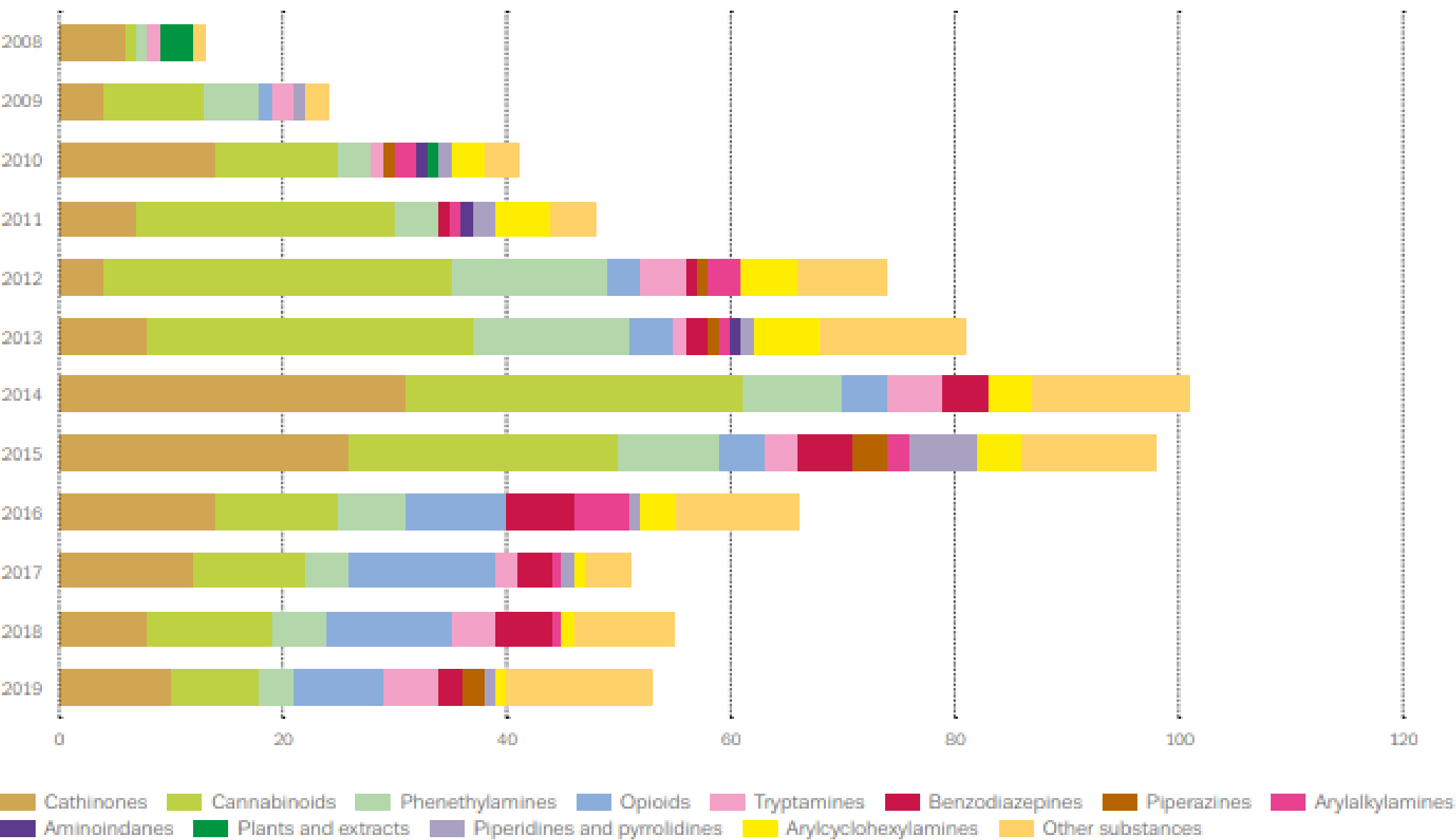




# What happened?

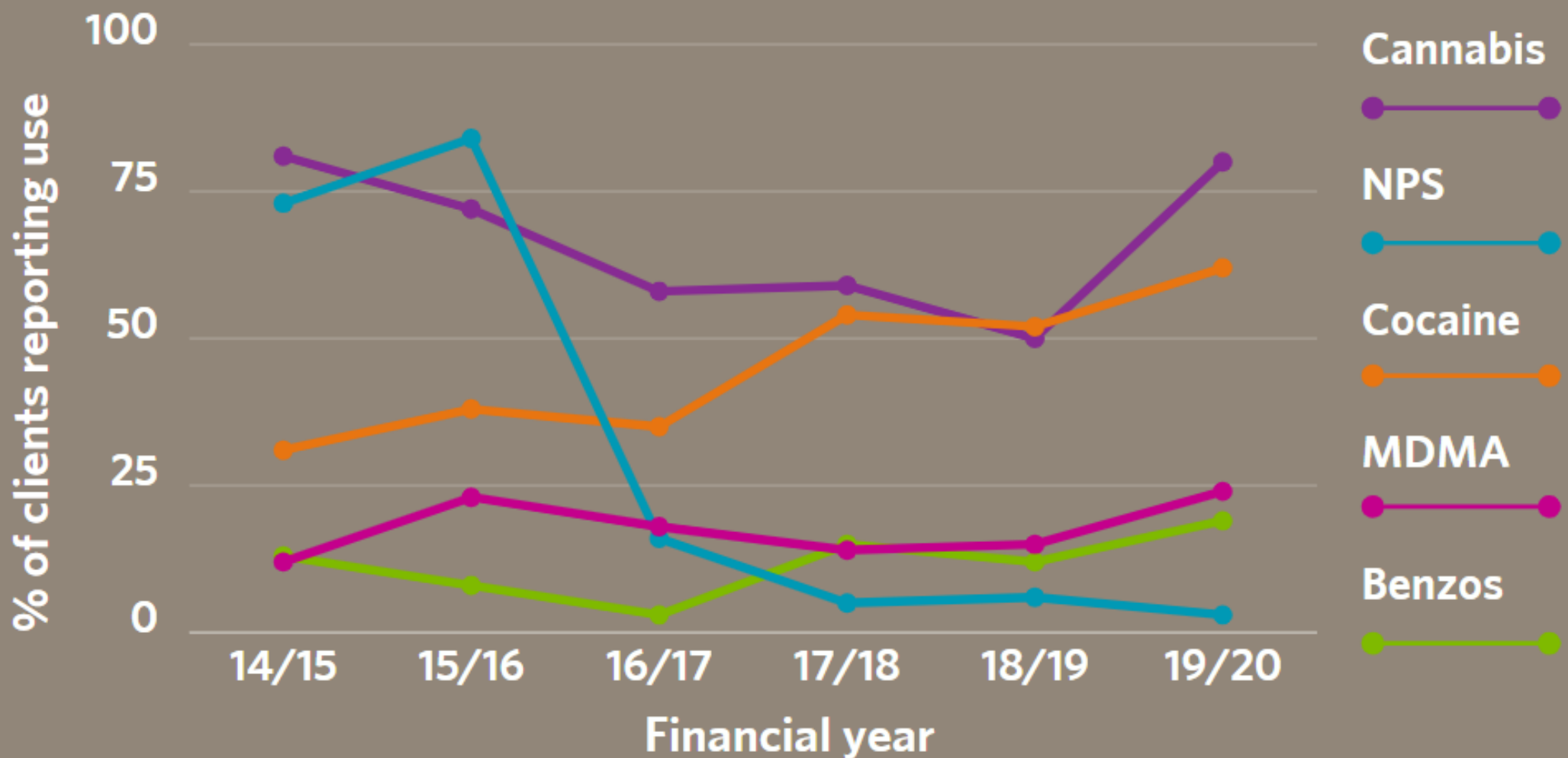
As this cycle of new drugs continued the drug market became saturated. By 31 October 2020, the EMCDDA was monitoring more than 820 new psychoactive substances that have appeared on Europe’s drug market since monitoring began in 1997 (EMCDDA, 2020).

NUMBER AND CATEGORIES OF NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES REPORTED TO THE EU EARLY WARNING SYSTEM FOR THE FIRST TIME, 2008-19





## Drugs reported by counselling clients at Crew, 2014 to 2020



**Since the Psychoactive Substances Act was implemented in 2016, Crew has seen a drop in the number of people accessing our counselling service to discuss the use of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS).**

**So did it reduce the harms from psychoactive drugs?**



# No...

**Although we did see a reduction in the number of people taking commercially available NPS, drug markets adapted quickly and we have observed no overall reduction in drug-related harms since 2016.**

**Since the introduction of the PSA in Scotland, Crew have noted:**

**Fewer people smoking herbal 'spice' mixtures**

**More people smoking/vaping 'spice' from paper, increase in use in prisons**

**Fewer people taking NPS stimulants (like ethylphenidate)**

**More people taking crack cocaine and cocaine powder, increase in injecting of both**

**Fewer people taking branded benzos or 'prescribable benzos' (like diazepam)**

**More people taking 'street benzos' (like etizolam) sold as loose pills or as counterfeit medicines**

**Fewer people taking empathogens (like MDAI)**

**More people taking MDMA, higher strength products in circulation**

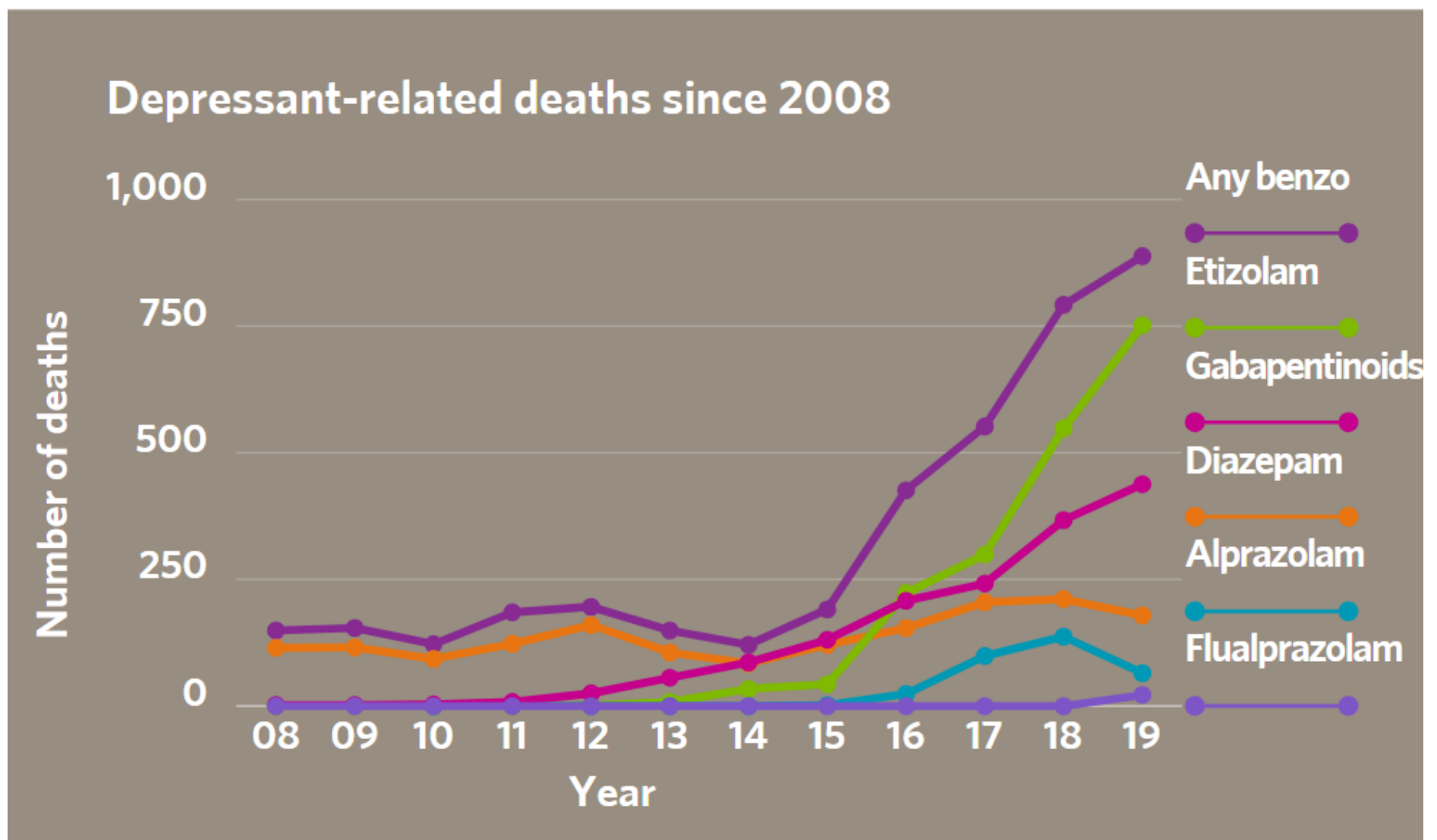




# What about drug deaths?

New Psychoactive Substances commonly feature in Scottish drug-related deaths - particularly benzodiazepines, such as etizolam.

In 2019, etizolam was implicated in more drug-related deaths than any other drug.

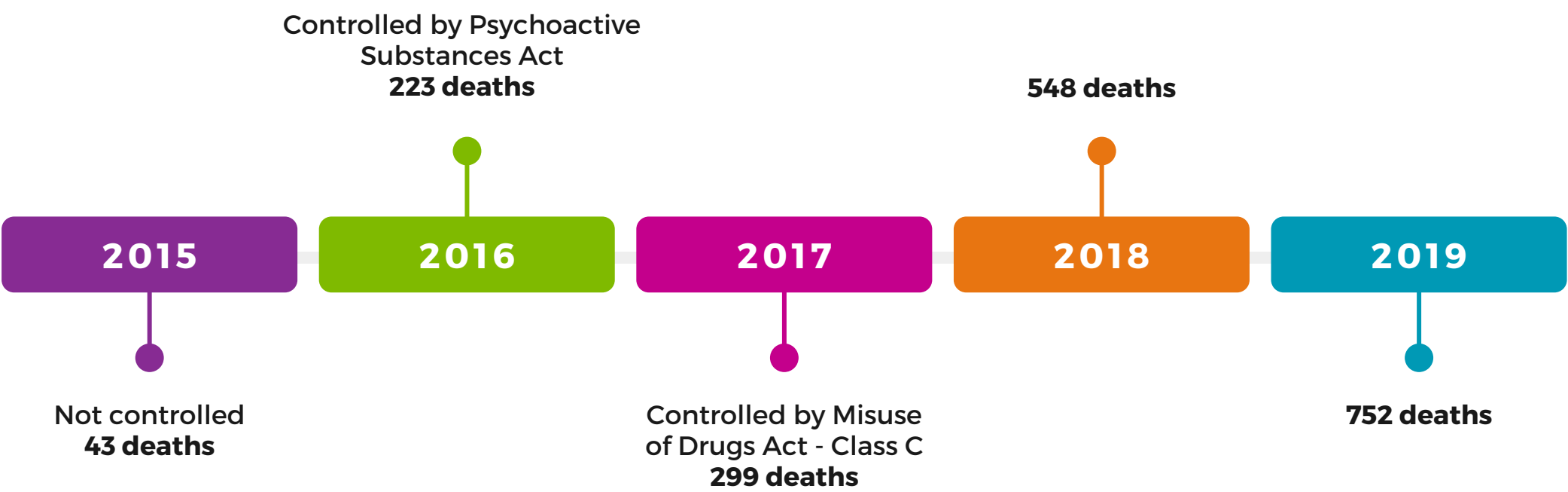




The introduction of the PSA caused a substantial shift in the Scottish benzos market. Etizolam's popularity surged after it was controlled and, along with it, it's presence in drug-related deaths.

When etizolam was sold 'legally', etizolam pills were imported from overseas. After the ban, control shifted to organised crime groups and etizolam was (primarily) imported in powder form, and then pressed into pills in the UK. This caused a reduction in the price and quality, and an increase in the variability and potency of the pills.

These legal changes also coincided with an ongoing review of benzodiazepine prescribing, which resulted in a reduction the availability of 'prescribable benzos' in some areas of Scotland.





# In conclusion...

The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 has removed these drugs from our newsagents and corners shops, however this has not stemmed the development of new drugs and it has not reduced the demand for drugs.

An appetite for mind altering substances seems to remain a feature of our culture and societies. To quote our friends from Energy Control in Spain:



**Drugs are like energy, they cannot be destroyed, only transformed.**

In order to better respond to the risks of new drugs we recognise that a focus on harm reduction and wellbeing is key.

In order to reduce the harm that drugs present we should seek to understand the drivers behind drug use and how we can help prevent individual's relationships with drugs becoming problematic.

[crew.scot](http://crew.scot)

[#TakeDrugsSeriously](https://twitter.com/crewscot)

