

# 2024 Methamphetamine Use by San Diego County Arrestees

Data from the SANDAG Substance Use Monitoring program

September 2025

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# Study Background

This SANDAG CJ Brief, *2024 Methamphetamine Use by San Diego County Arrestees*, is part of a series of reports highlighting findings from the Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) program—formerly known as the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of SUM, adults and juveniles booked into local jails are approached within 48 hours of their booking to participate in interviews regarding potential substance use and other high-risk behaviors. Because the number of juveniles booked into local jails has declined over the years, youth on probation were also interviewed at the San Diego Achievement Centers to ensure a representative sample.

## Acknowledgements

This effort would not be possible without funding from the SANDAG Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and the generous support from the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services, and the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). Their support—as well as the cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department, Probation Department, and the San Diego Achievement Centers—is gratefully acknowledged. To learn more about the SUM program and to access other current reports, visit [SANDAG.org/cj](https://www.sandag.org/cj).

# Introduction

Since 1987, as part of the Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) program, SANDAG has conducted confidential interviews with randomly selected adults and juveniles booked into San Diego County jails to gather data on drug use and involvement in other risky or illegal behaviors. These interviews are voluntary and conducted within 48 hours of an individual's booking. In 2024, 229 adults completed an interview and provided a valid urine sample for analysis. An additional 41 juveniles were interviewed, though only seven provided a valid urine sample.<sup>1</sup>

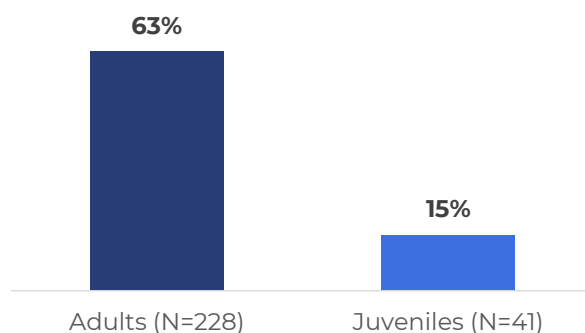
## Positive Drug Tests

Historically, the proportion of juveniles reporting meth use has been considerably lower than that of adults. In 2024, 63% of interviewed adults reported ever using methamphetamine (meth), while six juveniles (15% of those interviewed) reported ever using it (Figure 1). Long-term SUM trends show that since 2011, at least half of all adults interviewed every year have self-reported ever using meth (Figure 2). This proportion increased steadily over time, peaking at 70% in both 2016 and 2019, before decreasing in recent years.

**"It's addictive and I wish I never did it."**

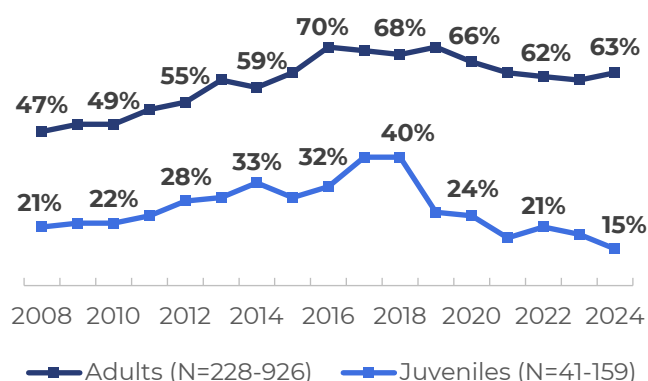
- 44-year-old male

**Figure 1: Self-Reported Meth Use Among Adults and Juveniles (2024)**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

**Figure 2: Rates of Self-Reported Meth Use Among Adults and Juveniles (2008-2024)**



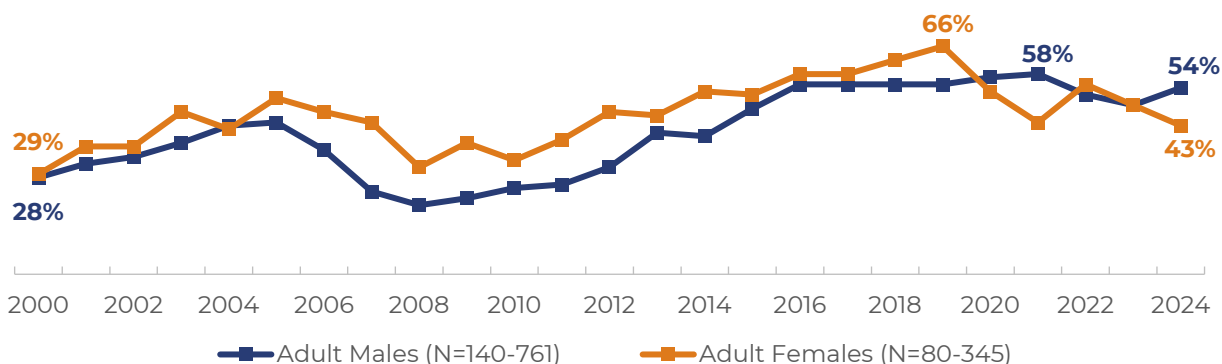
Source: SANDAG, 2024

An important component of the SUM project involves voluntary drug testing. Since 2015, roughly one in two respondents have tested positive for meth overall, but recent years show a clear departure from the long-standing pattern of higher positive rates among females. In 2024, 54% of males and 43% of females tested positive (Figure 3). Juveniles were excluded from this year-over-year comparison due to the small sample size collected.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adults were interviewed at the Vista Detention Facility, the San Diego Central Jail, and the Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility. Juveniles were interviewed at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility, the Youth Transition Center (YTC), and San Diego Achievement Centers.

<sup>2</sup> Because the Youth Transition Campus (YTC) was not fully operational until summer 2024, most juvenile interviews took place at the San Diego Achievement Centers and East Mesa Detention Facility. Drug testing was not feasible at these sites due to COVID-19 protocols and intake procedure changes. As a result, only seven urine samples were collected at the YTC.

**Figure 3: Percentage of Positive Tests for Meth Among Interviewed Adults, by Gender (2000-2024)**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

## Meth Addendum Findings

Given that meth has consistently been one of the most commonly used illicit drugs among individuals booked into San Diego County jails, those who report using it within the past 30 days are asked to complete an additional survey addendum. The addendum is designed to gather more detailed information about their meth use patterns, behaviors, and related experiences. Of the 143 adults and six juveniles who reported past meth use, 90 adults and two juveniles indicated they had used it within the past 30 days specifically. The following sections are thus based on the responses of these 92 individuals and summarize the information they shared during their interviews.<sup>3</sup>

### Respondent Perceptions of Meth's Market Dynamics

Understanding how people who use meth perceive the availability, price, and quality of meth can offer insights into consumer behavior and help inform efforts to reduce related harms. In 2024, among those who reported meth use in the 30 days preceding the interview, about one in three (35%) reported that meth was more available compared to the previous year and 44% reported that the price was lower (Figure 4). Two in three (66%) noted that the quality of meth was worse from the year prior—the highest percentage since 2007 (not shown).

**Figure 4: Respondent Perceptions of Meth Availability, Pricing, and Quality in 2024 Compared to the Year Prior**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

<sup>3</sup> The 2024 sample consisted of 62% males and 38% females. The racial/ethnic composition was 42% Hispanic, 38% White, 17% Black or African American, 2% Asian, and 1% Other.

## Meth Purchase and Usage Patterns

Despite efforts to decrease meth use and its availability, the Drug Enforcement Administration reports that meth continues to be available with high purity and potency in the United States.<sup>4</sup> To further probe the availability of meth, respondents were asked a series of questions to describe how they typically get the drug, their daily and monthly usage, and their typical consumption methods.

**“Someone put  
fentanyl in [my] meth”**

- 25-year-old male

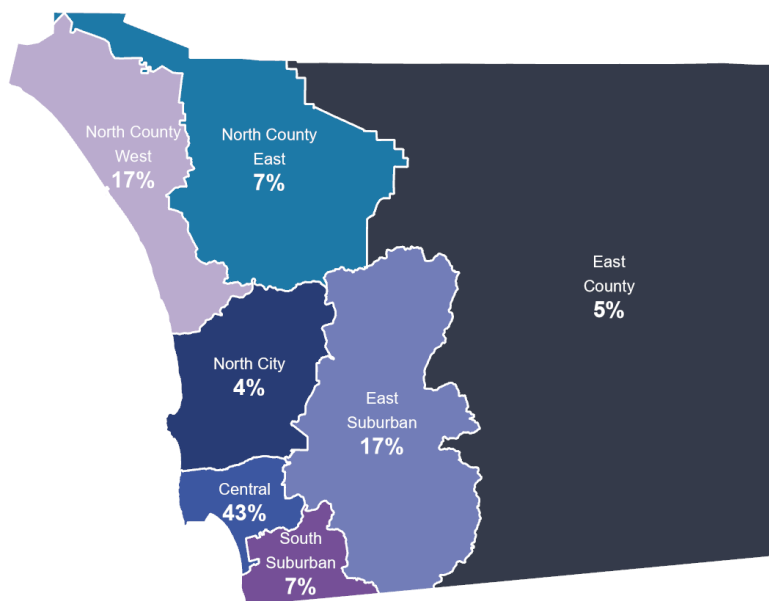
### Purchasing Patterns

Nearly half of respondents (44%) reported having a primary source or dealer from whom they typically purchase meth. Among those 39 individuals, 31 provided information about how long they have relied on that source—with a median duration of three years. While most respondents with a main source exclusively purchased meth from their main source, about one in four (26%) said they also obtain other drugs from them. When their primary source is unavailable, one-third (33%) said they typically buy from someone else. Purchasing meth from strangers is also common, with 57% of all respondents indicating they have purchased meth from someone they did not know.

### Location of Meth Purchase

In 2023, most arrestees reported buying meth in either the central (43%), east suburban (17%), or north county west (17%) major statistical areas (MSA) in the county (Figure 5).<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 5: Meth Purchasing Patterns Across San Diego County's MSAs in 2024**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

<sup>4</sup> Drug Enforcement Administration (May 2024). 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Available at <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/5.23.2024%20NTA-updated.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> There are seven MSAs in the San Diego region that describe different geographical areas of the County. To view these MSAs on a map, visit: <https://sdgis.sandag.org/>.

## Usage Patterns and Consumption Methods

To better understand the intensity and regularity of meth use among participants, addendum questions examined both monthly and daily usage patterns. When asked about their longest consecutive period of use in the past 30 days, participants reported a median (average) of 20 days in a row (range 1 to 30) (Figure 6). Notably, one-fourth (25%) of respondents reported daily use in the past 30 days (not shown).

On days when meth was used, respondents reported a median frequency of three times per day. However, 19% indicated using it 10 or more times daily (not shown). Among 43 respondents who provided specific quantities consumed, the average reported consumption was 1.6 grams per day.

**Figure 6: Average Meth Use Frequency and Quantity Among Respondents**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

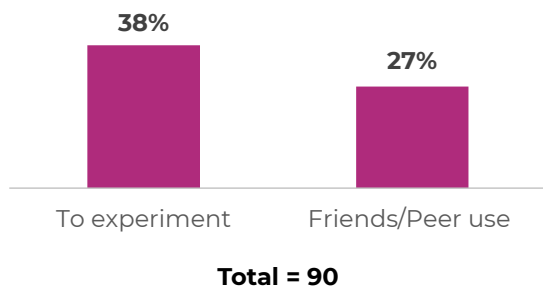
Regarding methods of consumption, the majority of participants (78%) reported smoking meth (alone, not mixed) as their primary method. When asked about their second most common method used in the past 12 months, the most frequently reported were snorting (32%) and injecting (29%) (not shown).

## Motivations for Meth Use

While initial motivations for meth use were most frequently rooted in curiosity and social influence, current use is primarily driven by addiction and functional needs. When asked why they first began using meth, nearly two-fifths of respondents (38%) cited experimentation and 27% attributed their initiation to friend or peer influence (Figure 7). In contrast, the most commonly reported reasons for current use were addiction (37%) and staying awake (26%) (Figure 8).

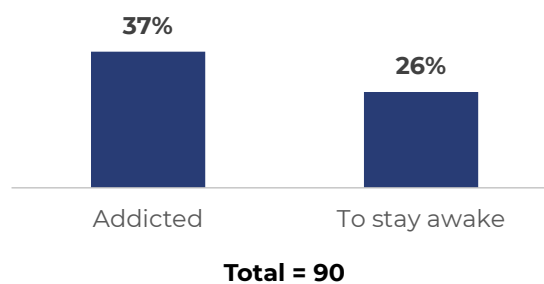
**"It actually helps with physical pain, a lot of people don't realize it can benefit you"**  
- 40-year-old female

**Figure 7: Top Two Reasons Respondents Began to Use Meth**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

**Figure 8: Top Two Reasons Respondents Currently Use Meth**



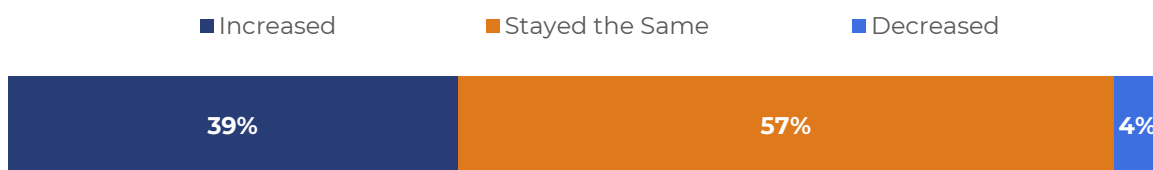
Source: SANDAG, 2024

## Demand for Meth

More than one in four (27%) respondents reported having sold meth or acted as a middleman within the last year, indicating that many users are not only consumers but are also active participants in the distribution of meth. Among those respondents, 39% said the demand for meth had increased in 2024 compared to the previous year (Figure 9). However, more than half (57%) indicated that the demand had stayed the same.

**"I wish I would have never started using"**  
- 55-year-old female

**Figure 9: Perceptions of Meth Demand According to Respondents who Engaged in Distribution**



**Total = 23**

Source: SANDAG, 2024

## Additional Risk Factors Reported

- Of 42 respondents, **52%** reported using meth before or during work hours. The most common job sectors reported were construction, retail/merchandising, driving, and mechanic.
- **26%** of respondents have carried a weapon with them when getting meth. Of those, most (**70%**) were weapons other than guns (e.g., knife).
- In regard to sexual activity in the past six months:
  - **50%** reported having sex while high on meth "fairly often" or "very often."
  - **16%** reported "fairly often" or "very often" worrying that their sexual behavior might put them at risk for HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases.

