



SANDAG

BULLETIN CJ

2022 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

July 2023

Research findings from the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse

Highlights

Nearly all interviewed juveniles have tried at least one illicit substance

Ninety-six percent (96%) of youth interviewed in 2022 reported ever trying at least one illicit substance and nearly three in five (59%) reported trying all three gateway drugs (i.e., marijuana, alcohol, or tobacco).

Marijuana use amongst interviewed youth remains steady

Of all substances, marijuana had the greatest proportion (93%) of youth who reported ever trying it and it was also the substance youth reported using most recently, with 77% reporting use within the last 30 days. Marijuana was also the first substance most of the youth (71%) reported trying first and 96% of youth reported it was **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** to obtain.

The popularity of vaping continues to increase in the interviewed youth

While the proportion of interviewed youth who reported ever smoking tobacco has dropped to a 5 year low of 59%, the proportion of youth who reported vaping has continued to increase from the 76% in 2019 when the question was first asked, to the current 4 year high of 91%.

Prescription and over-the-counter drug usage has increased among interviewed juveniles

Almost half (48%) of youth reported ever abusing prescription or over-the-counter drugs, increasing from the 36% reported in the previous year. Tranquilizers remained the most frequently abused prescription drug, with 31% of youth reporting ever using.

Youth report low participation and interest in drug treatment

While nearly all interviewed youth have tried at least one illicit substance and most begun using substances at a young age, only about one in four (23%) reported ever receiving treatment and most (87%) don't think they'd need treatment. Of those who did receive treatment, less than half (46%) successfully completed it.

Interviewed youth reported victimization

One in five (20%) interviewed youth reported being approached to smuggle drugs across the U.S.-Mexican border and just under one in five (16%) had been approached by someone offering to pimp or prostitute them.

Background

When the juvenile component of the nationally funded ADAM (Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring) program was discontinued in 2003 (one year before the entire program ended), local funding was secured, which enabled SANDAG to continue this important data collection effort in the region as the San Diego County Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. In 2022, the SAM program was supported by the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA), Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), and the San Diego County Achievement Centers.¹ Their support, as well as funding from SANDAG member agencies through the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and the cooperation of the San Diego County Probation Department, is gratefully acknowledged.

This CJ Bulletin - 2022 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region - is the second in a four-part series presenting SAM data collected (from both juveniles and adults) in the 2022 calendar year. This bulletin includes information pertaining to lifetime and recent self-reported drug use, perceived risk and availability of different drugs, characteristics of the youth interviewed, and how these factors may be related to drug use. In addition, all the data (percentages and raw numbers) captured through the juvenile interviews for the past five years (2018-2022) are available online at [SANDAG.org/cj](https://www.sandag.org/cj).

As part of this study, 42 youth from East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility were interviewed. Fourteen additional youth from the San Diego Achievement Centers were interviewed to supplement the sample as the number of youth booked into detention facilities has continued to decrease over the years.

Historically, this publication has included and discussed the results of urinalysis tests, however, due to COVID-19 protocols and intake procedures at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention facility, urine samples were not collected in the 2022 interviewing cycles for youth.² Additionally, urine samples were not collected from youth interviewed at the Achievement Centers as they have not been adjudicated.

What information is collected through these interviews?

Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 4)

Patterns of substance use (page 5)

Perceptions of how harmful drugs are and how easy they are to get (page 8)

Illicit use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs (page 10)

Previous drug treatment and perception of current need for treatment (page 13)

Risk factors related to home environment, mental health, and school attendance (page 14)

Criminal and other risk behavior (page 15)

¹ Achievement Centers were launched by the County of San Diego in FY 2020. The purpose of Achievement Centers is to offer at-risk youth and youth on probation after-school programming that provides opportunities to engage in prosocial and rehabilitation services in the community and divert them from detention. The inclusion of Achievement Center youth in the sample is appropriate due to the behavioral similarities they have with active justice involved youth. Additionally, as the number of youth booked into detention facilities continues to decrease, the inclusion of Achievement Center youth ensures a sufficient sample size is gathered to understand this juvenile population.

² The collection of urine samples will likely resume once the San Diego County Juvenile Hall re-opens. Use caution when comparing this year's sample to previous years because youth responses were historically only included if they provided a urine sample.

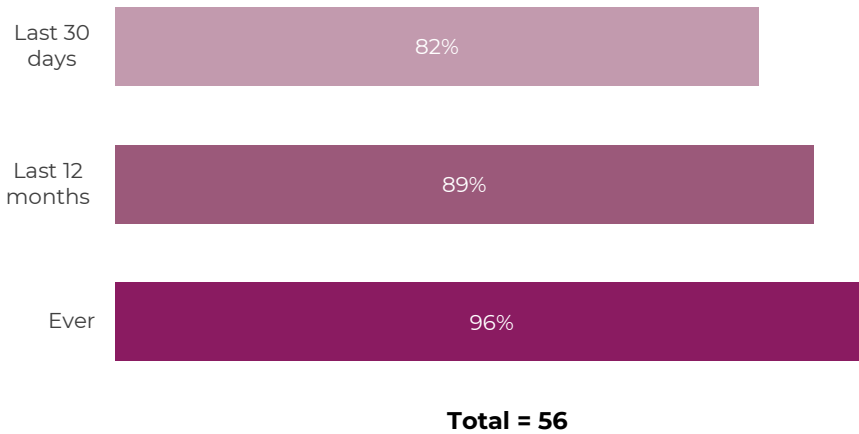
How many youth with justice system contact had ever tried illicit substances?

In 2022, almost all (96%) of the youth interviewed reported ever trying an illicit substance, which includes alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine (meth), and ecstasy. The majority of youth also reported recent use of at least one of these substances – 89% in the last 12 months and 82% in the last 30 days (Figure 1). Of the youth who reported ever trying one of these substances, the average (mean) number of drugs tried was 2.9 (range 1 to 6).

What were the characteristics of the youth interviewed?

Of the 56 interviewed youth, 40 (71%) were male and 16 (29%) were female. A majority of interviewed youth were Hispanic/Latino(a) (61%), followed by White (21%), and Black/African American (18%). The average age of interviewed youth was 16.0, and most youth reported being enrolled in school (82%) at the time of the interview.

Figure 1
Almost all juveniles interviewed reported previous substance use



SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

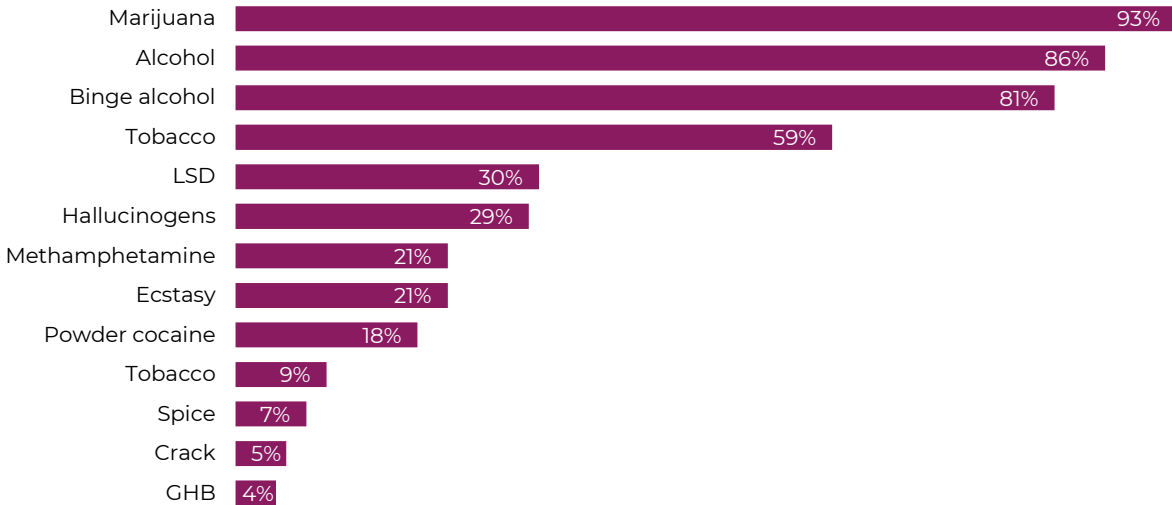
Takeaway

Almost all youth interviewed reported experimentation with illicit substances. Over four in five had used substances in the past 30 days and the average number of substances ever tried was 2.9.

What were the patterns of substance use among youth interviewed?

Similar to prior years, marijuana (93%) and alcohol (86%) were the most frequently tried substances, followed by tobacco (59%). Eighty-one percent (81%) of the youth also reported binge drinking alcohol (defined as 5 or more drinks on one occasion for males and 4 for females) (Figure 2). None of the interviewed youth reported ever trying heroin or inhalants.

Figure 2
Marijuana and alcohol remain two substances most often tried by youth

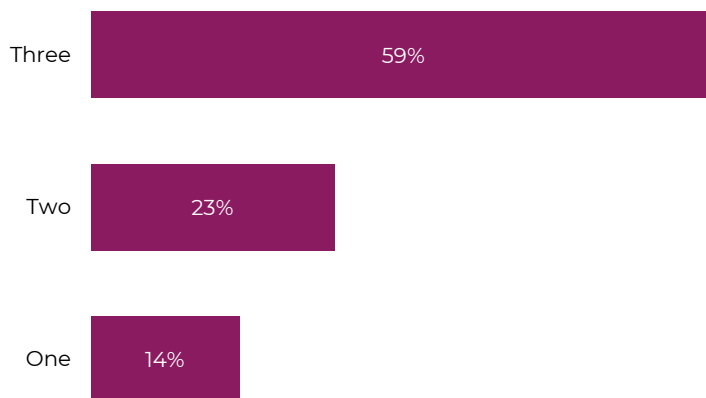


Total = 53-56

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

The three drugs considered “gateways” into further substance use for youth include alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco. Consistent with previous years, most interviewed youth (59%) report having tried all three gateway drugs (Figure 3). Only 4% had not tried any substance.

Figure 3
Majority of interviewed youth have tried all three gateway drugs

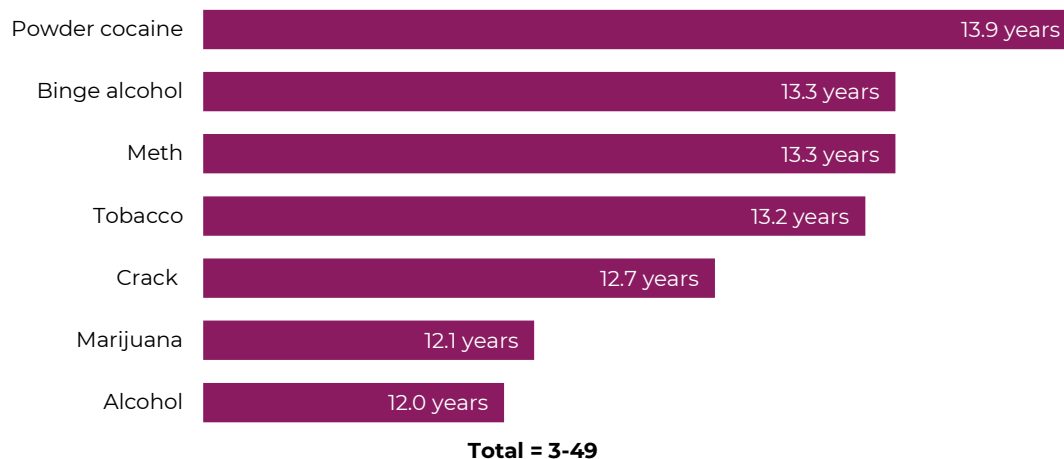


Total = 56

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

For many of these youth, marijuana and alcohol use started first, around the age of 12, followed by crack at 12.7, on average. Binge alcohol use, on average, started a little more than one year after initial alcohol use (Figure 4).

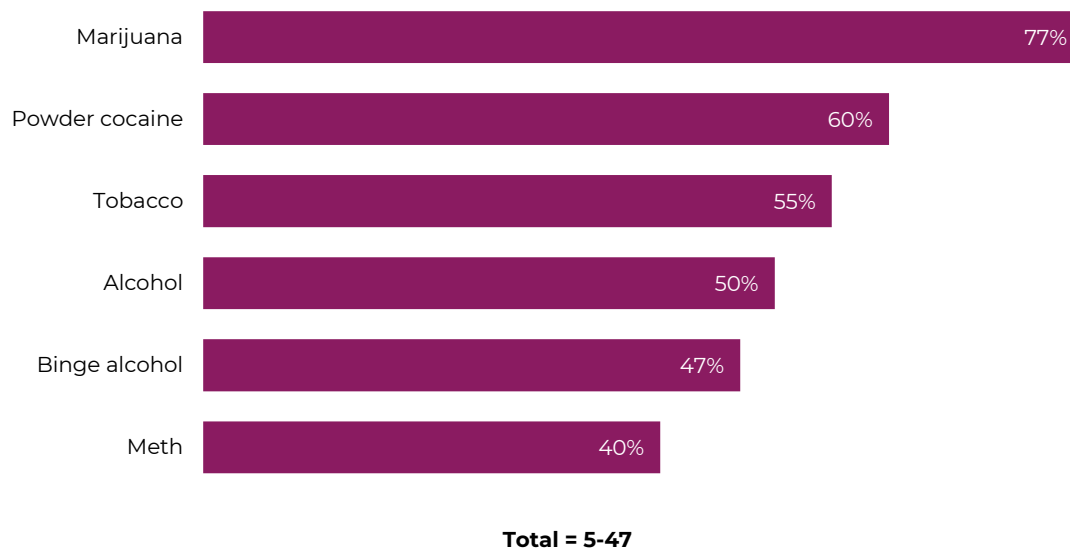
Figure 4
Marijuana, alcohol, and crack use start before age 13, on average



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

Youth were also asked about recent (i.e., past 30 days) drug use for all drugs they reported ever trying. The drug with the greatest percentage of recent use was marijuana, with almost four in five (77%) reporting use within the past 30 days. The next substances used most recently were powder cocaine (60%) and tobacco (55%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5
More than three in four youth who have tried marijuana reported using it in the past 30 days

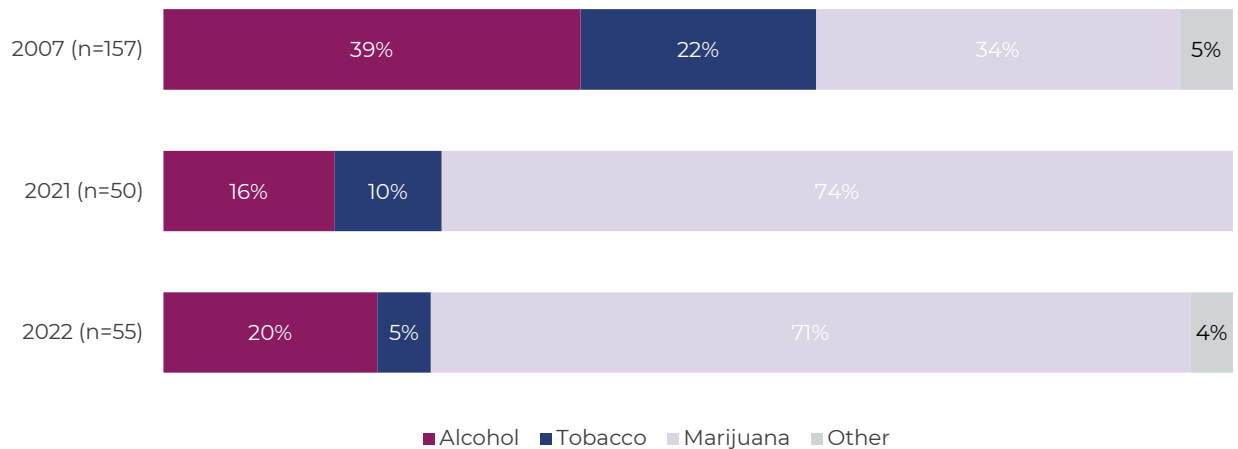


NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

In 2007, when the question was first asked, slightly more youth reported that alcohol was the first substance they had ever tried (39%), compared to marijuana (34%). This year, the majority of youth reported marijuana as the first ever tried substance (71%), followed by alcohol (20%), and tobacco (5%) (Figure 6). The 2022 rates of the first substance tried varied slightly from last year, but still follow the same trend, demonstrating the continued popularity of marijuana use among youth.

Figure 6

Marijuana remains first substance tried by most youth in 2022



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

To gather additional information regarding youth tobacco usage trends, youth were asked a series of questions regarding vaping habits and perceptions.

- Over nine in ten (91%) of the youth said they had ever vaped and almost three-fourths (73%) of those who had ever vaped reported vaping in the past 30 days. Of those who vaped in the past 30 days, the average (mean) number of days vaped was 16.1 (range 2 to 30).
- When asked what substances they had vaped, the most common responses were flavored nicotine (82%) and marijuana/THC (78%). In addition, 33% reported vaping non-flavored nicotine.
- Three-fourths (75%) reported vaping at school.
- Almost nine in ten (87%) said they preferred vaping to smoking cigarettes and almost half (47%) thought vaping was less harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- When asked how bad they thought vaping was, 56% of youth who had vaped before thought vaping was **“VERY BAD”** or **“EXTREMELY BAD”** compared to 100% of youth who had never vaped before.
- Around one in four (24%) reported ever getting sick from vaping.

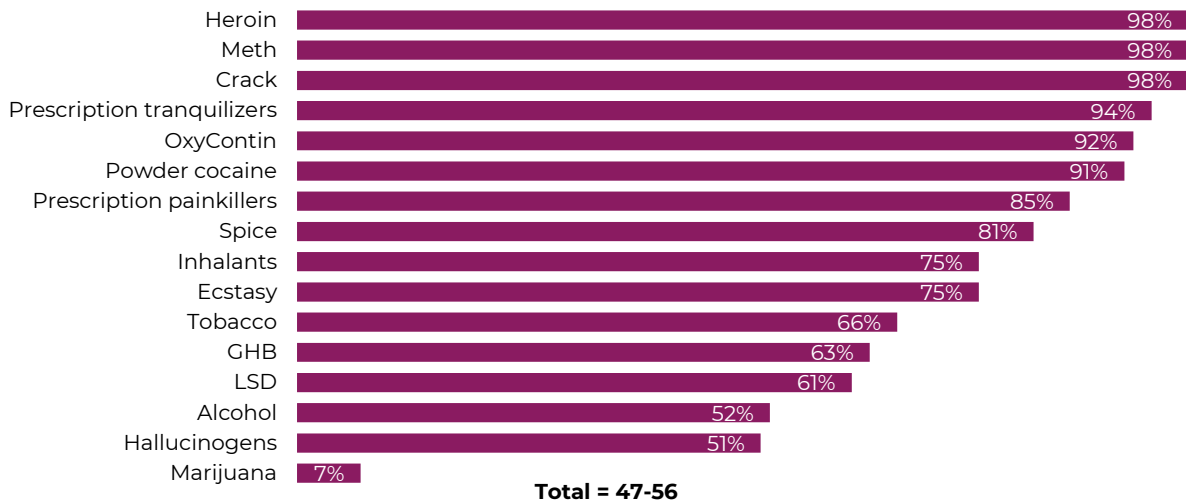
Takeaway

Marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco remain the most popular substances among youth, with all three being in the top 5 substances youth report ever trying and the top 5 substances youth reported trying at a younger age. Marijuana is the substance most youth report trying first.

What were youth's perceptions of how harmful different substances are?

When asked how bad they thought different drugs were for them (on a four-point scale), at least three-fifths or more of youth perceived almost all of the listed substances as being **“EXTREMELY BAD”** or **“VERY BAD,”** however, less than one in ten (7%) perceived marijuana as being harmful for the user (Figure 7). The substances youth perceived as most harmful included crack, meth, and heroin, all at 98%. While most of the perceived levels of harm are relatively high, compared to 2021 (not shown), youth perceived all included substances aside from alcohol as being less harmful in 2022.

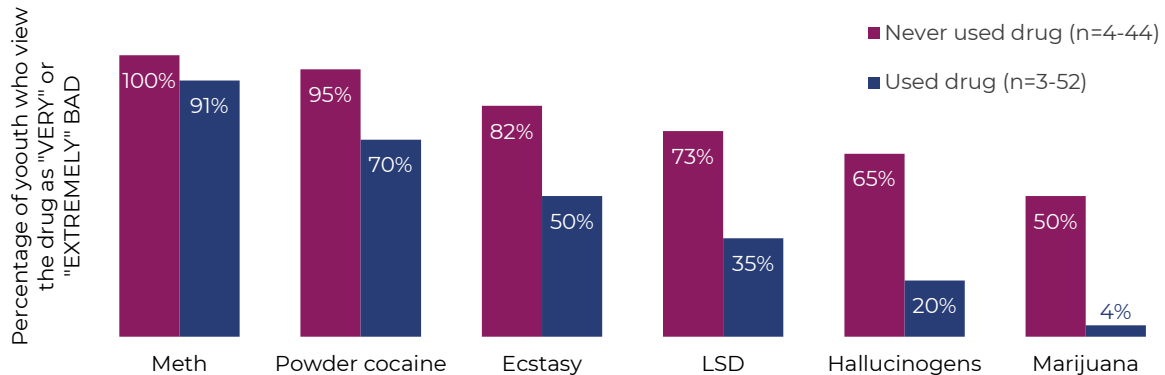
Figure 7
Less than 1 in 10 youth think marijuana is harmful



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

For some drugs, perception of harm differed significantly by whether a youth had previously used it. That is, those who had ever tried the respective drug were less likely to perceive it as very harmful, compared to those who had not. As seen in Figure 8, the difference in harm perception was significant regarding meth, powder cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, hallucinogens, and marijuana.

Figure 8
Some drugs perceived as less harmful by those who had used them*

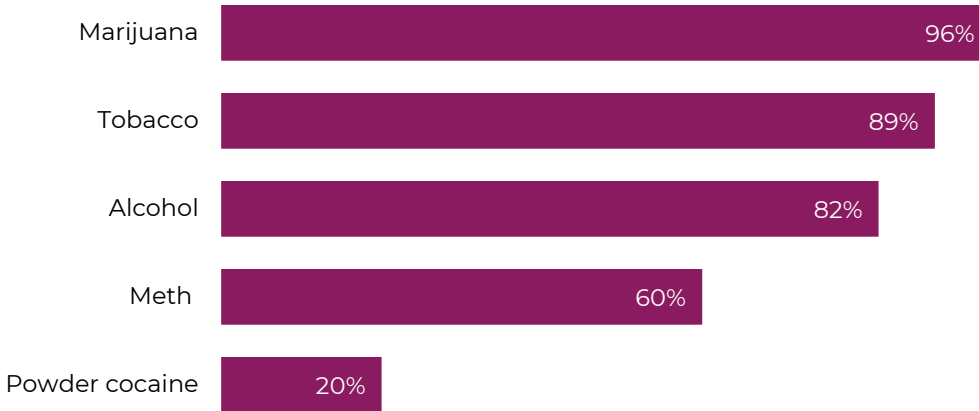


*Significant at $p < .05$
 NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

According to interviewed youth, marijuana (96%) was the substance most often described as “**VERY EASY**” or “**EASY**” to obtain (Figure 9).³

Figure 9

Youth say that marijuana and tobacco are the easiest substances to obtain



Total = 5-47

*NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023*

When youth who had ever used alcohol were asked how they most recently obtained it, the most common responses included someone 21 years or older gave it to them (32%), they took it from their own home or someone else’s home (30%), they bought it (13%), or someone under 21 gave it to them (11%).

Takeaway

Although harm perception varied based on whether the youth reported ever trying the drug or not, most youth perceived marijuana, hallucinogens, and alcohol as the least harmful substances to users. More than four in five to almost all said that “gateways” drugs were easy or very easy to obtain.

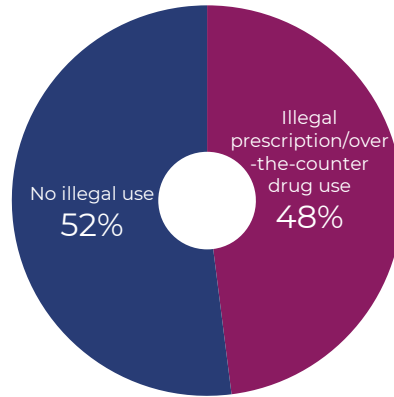
³ It is important to note that only one youth provided their perception on the ease of obtaining crack. This youth reported crack was “very easy” to obtain. Due to this small sample size, it was not included in Figure 9 and it is advised to use caution when interpreting these results.

How many youth were using prescription drugs illegally?

Just under half (48%) of surveyed youth reported ever using prescription and/or over-the-counter medication illegally (Figure 10). Compared to the 36% reported in 2021, this year's rate demonstrates a 12% change in the amount of youth who report illegal prescription/over-the-counter drug use.

Figure 10

Almost half of juveniles have illegally used prescription or over-the-counter drugs



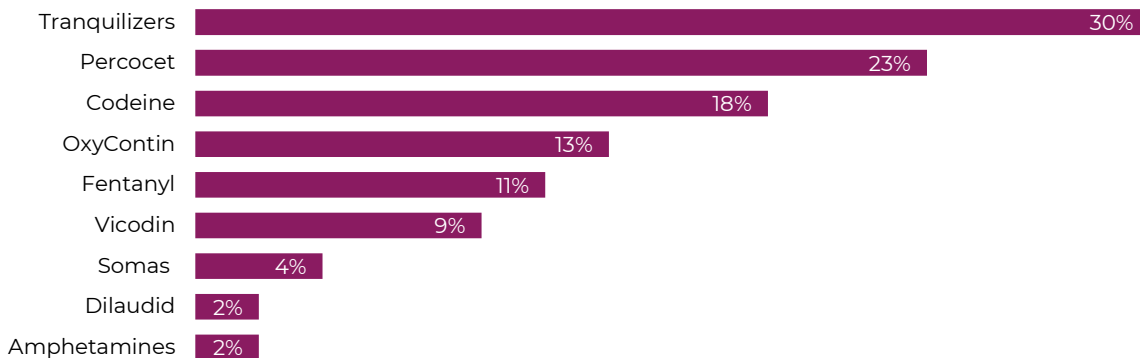
Total = 56

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

The most commonly abused prescription drug⁴ was tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rohypnol/Roachas) (31%) and the most commonly abused prescription painkiller⁵ was Percocet (23%). Other prescription drugs youth reported abusing included Codeine (18%), Somas (4%), Dilaudid (2%), and amphetamines (2%), and other painkillers youth abused included OxyContin (13%), fentanyl (11%), and Vicodin (9%) (Figure 11). Of those who ever used a specific prescription drug illegally, youth only reported recent use of tranquilizers (24%), Percocet (15%), and Codeine (10%).

Figure 11

Tranquilizers, Percocet, and OxyContin among most abused prescription drugs by youth



Total = 55-56

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

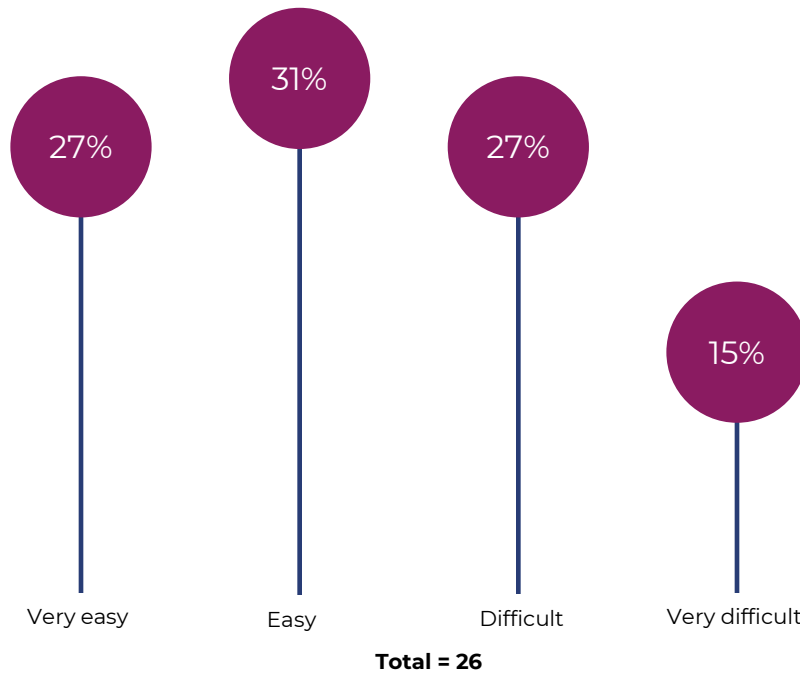
⁴ General prescription drugs in the survey instrument include tranquilizers, anti-depressants, barbiturates, Ketamine, Codeine, Dilaudid, Somas, and amphetamines.

⁵ Prescription painkillers in the survey instrument include methadone, Suboxone, Percocet, Vicodin, Demerol, fentanyl, morphine, OxyContin, tramadol, and Darvon.

A higher proportion of youth who had abused prescription drugs said they were **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** (58%) to obtain compared to the proportion who reported them as being **“VERY DIFFICULT”** or **“DIFFICULT”** to obtain (Figure 12).

Figure 12

More than half of interviewed youth report obtaining prescription drugs illegally is easy



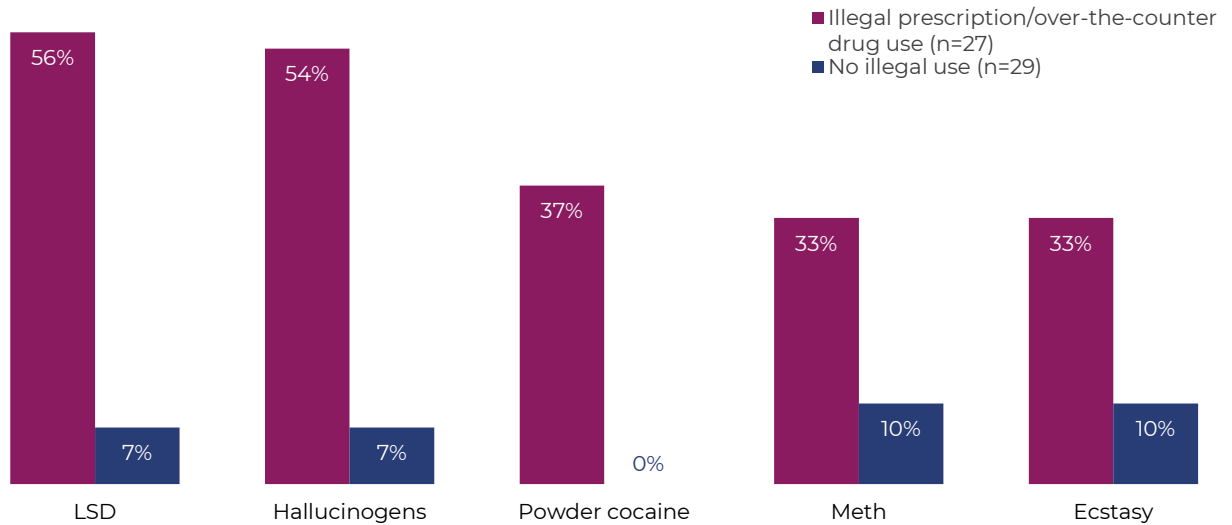
NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

When asked how they got the prescription drugs, the most common response was that another person gave it to them (83%), with the other person most often being a friend (74%), or acquaintance (32%). In addition, 48% said they bought it and 30% took it from someone (most often a family member, 57%).

Those youth who reported abusing prescription or over-the-counter medication were significantly more likely to have tried other illicit drugs. As seen in Figure 13, LSD and hallucinogens were the two most frequently tried illicit drugs by youth who abused prescription and over-the-counter drugs.

Figure 13

Youth who abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs are significantly more likely to use illicit drugs*



*Significant at $p < 0.05$

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

Takeaway

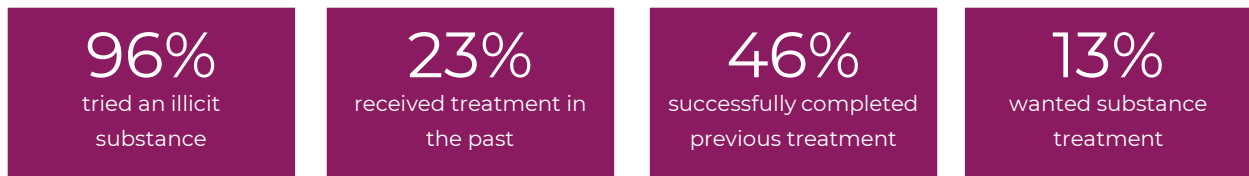
More youth reported abusing prescription drugs in 2022, compared to 2021, with tranquilizers and Percocet being the most frequently reported. Youth who abused prescription and over-the-counter drugs were significantly more likely to have tried other illicit drugs including LSD, hallucinogens, powder cocaine, meth, and ecstasy.

How many of these youth have received drug treatment or feel they could use treatment now?

Around one-fourth (23%) of youth reported they had previously received drug treatment. Of those youth who had received treatment in the past, 38% had been in treatment once, 31% twice, 15% three times, and 15% four or more times. The most recent treatment experience was more likely to be court-ordered (85%) than voluntary (15%); 67% were outpatient, 25% were inpatient, and 8% were 12-step programs such as Narcotics Anonymous/Alcoholics Anonymous. Of all youth who received treatment, 46% reported that they had successfully completed it, or had successfully completed the most recent time if they had received treatment more than once. Youth who did not successfully complete treatment were asked the reason why and the most common responses were that the program was too long (33%) and that they got arrested during programming (33%). When asked what they had ever received treatment for, 69% said marijuana, 38% said alcohol, 23% said cocaine/crack, 15% said meth and 31% said some other substance or combination of substances. When asked if they wanted to seek treatment now (for a drug they had ever used), only 13% said they did. Of these seven youth, three said they needed it for marijuana, two for alcohol, two for tobacco, and one for meth.

Figure 14

Engagement and interest in substance treatment is low in youth although almost all have tried an illicit substance



SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

What do we know about other needs and risk factors among these youth?

Home environment

- Prior to arrest, 86% of the youth interviewed reported living in a stable residence, 5% said they lived in some type of group setting (including East Mesa or another detention facility, group home, or treatment facility) and 9% said they were homeless.
- When asked who they lived with, 62% said their mother and 18% their father. In addition, only about one in ten (13%) lived with both parents and 33% said they did not live with a parent at all.
- Over three-fifths (62%) reported that they lived with at least one sibling.
- A little over one-third (36%) said their immediate family had some type of previous Child Welfare Services (CWS) involvement.
- Almost one in three (29%) had been in foster care at some time in their life.
- Forty-nine percent (49%) of the youth reported a sibling and 57% said a parent had been previously arrested and booked into a detention facility.
- When asked whether they knew if their parents had abused alcohol or used other drugs, not including marijuana, 51% said they did. In addition, 4% said they were aware of illegal parental marijuana use.
- Just under half (45%) of the youth reported they had previously run away from home. The most common reasons cited were family (67%) and personal (63%) issues.

Mental health

- Twenty-five percent (25%) of the youth reported they had previously thought about killing themselves and 14% had previously made a suicide attempt.
- Thirty-six percent (36%) of the youth interviewed said they had seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavior, or mental health issues. Around one in three (29%) said they had been told by a professional they had a diagnosed issue and of those 16 youth, almost three quarters (74%) were prescribed medication for it.
- Thirty-eight percent (38%) said they had felt like their mental, emotional, or psychological health has gotten in the way of doing activities or accomplishing goals at least once in the past and 62% of those youth said they had felt this way in the past 30 days.

School/work

- Seventy-three percent (73%) of the youth reported they had previously skipped school or been truant, and of those, 18% were not currently enrolled in school because of an expulsion, suspension, or dropping out on their own.
- The mean number of days truant in the previous month was 6.3 (range 1 to 20).
- Thirty-three percent (33%) had been referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB).

Home

33%
live with no parent

36%
previous CWS contact

29%
foster care involvement

57%
parental criminal history

51%
parental substance use

45%
ran away from home

Mental health

25%
have thought about suicide

School

73%
history of truancy

Other risks

44%
of females have been approached for human trafficking

13%
have overdosed

What is the criminal and other risky behavior history of these youth?

- Four-fifths (80%) of the youth reported they had been arrested previously, 91% had been previously detained at a juvenile facility, and 80% had been under probation supervision before (93% of whom still were).
- The median number of prior arrests was 4.4 (range 1 to 30).
- Just under three-fifths (59%) of the youth reported ever participating in some type of diversion or alternative sanction program. The diversion or alternative sanction program youth reported involvement in the most was San Diego County Achievement Centers (39%) or some other program (39%).
- When asked what type of crime they were first arrested for, 55% said a violent crime, 45% property, 18% status⁶, 11% drugs, and 9% weapons.
- When asked if they were aware of curfew laws, 80% of the youth reported that they were and 36% said that they had been stopped by law enforcement in the past for violating curfew.
- Despite the fact that only one (2%) youth was arrested for a drug-related offense as the highest charge on the current arrest, 38% reported they had some previous involvement in drug distribution – either selling drugs, serving as a middleman, or both. When asked what drug(s) were involved, 95% said marijuana, 20% powder cocaine, 20% meth, 10% LSD, 10% OxyContin, 5% ecstasy, 5% crack, and 25% said some other drug(s). Almost one-fourth (24%) of those ever involved in drug distribution said they had been involved in the past 30 days.
- Eleven percent (11%) reported they had previously committed a crime to get money to buy drugs.
- Overall, 45% of the youth interviewed said they were in a gang or have hung out with gang members at some point, and of those who have, 92% have done so within the last 5 years. When asked their current status, 38% said they currently hang out (but were never a member), 25% said they are currently a member, 17% used to hang out, 13% used to be a member, and 8% used to be a member, but currently hang out with gang members. On average, these individuals said they started hanging out with the gang when they were 10.7 (range 1 to 14) years old.
- When asked about their former association as a gang member, the seven youth who stopped hanging out with gangs reported the following reasons for stopping: five said they were tired of the lifestyle, two said they moved, one wanted to avoid/get out of the justice system, and one said it was too dangerous.
- Seven of the sixteen females (44%) interviewed, and two of the 38 males (5%) interviewed reported they had been approached by someone offering to pimp/prostitute them. When these youth were asked to list all the places where the solicitation happened five said online, four said at school, two each said at a shopping center or park, and one each said at a friend's house, party, or on the street.
- One female (2%) said she had ever been involved in pimping activities and five youth (9%) reported

Justice system related behaviors

80%
have been previously arrested

59%
have participated in a diversion or alternative sanction program

General risky behaviors

38%
have been involved in drug distribution

45%
in gang or associated with one

2%
have been involved in pimping activities

30%
have brought a weapon to school

31%
have had a gun

4%
have crossed the border to smuggle drugs back

⁶ A status offense is a noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth's status as a minor.

ever engaging in prostitution.

- Just under one-third of the youth who were interviewed (30%) reported they had brought a weapon to school. Most frequently, the weapon brought to school was a knife (88%). When asked why they had the weapon, 76% said for protection, 29% each said retaliation or to threaten someone, 24% said they forgot they had it, and 18% said it was a status symbol.
- Thirty-one percent (31%) of those surveyed reported they had ever had a gun. When asked where they got it from, the most common responses were from a friend (67%), bought off the street (20%), that they stole it (7%), and bought it from a pawn shop (2%). When asked how easy it was to get a gun, 50% said **“EASY”** and 38% said **“VERY EASY.”**
- Nineteen percent (19%) of youth reported they had crossed the U.S./Mexico border to drink alcohol, and the mean age of first crossing was 14.2 (range 12 to 16). While only percent (4%) reported crossing the border to bring drugs into the U.S., 20% reported they had previously been approached to transport drugs across the border, compared to 7% from last year (not shown).
- When the youth were asked if they had participated in any types of risky behaviors related to substance use in the past 12 months, the most frequent behaviors they reported included riding in a car with a driver who had used alcohol/drugs (52%), going to school intoxicated (52%), and participating in sexual activities after using alcohol/drugs (46%) (Table 1).
- Thirteen percent (13%) of the youth reported they previously had a drug overdose. When asked what drug(s) they had overdosed on, responses included marijuana, prescription and over-the-counter drugs (i.e., Xanax, Percocet, Codeine), and drugs laced with fentanyl. None of the youth who had overdosed said they had ever been administered naloxone.

Table 1
Many juvenile arrestees participate in risky behaviors associated with substance use

Ride in a car with a driver who has used alcohol/drugs	52%
Go to school high/drunken	52%
Participate in sexual acts after using alcohol/drugs	46%
Get in trouble with parents for using alcohol/drugs	43%
Get in a physical fight after using alcohol/drugs	39%
Get sick from alcohol/drugs	38%
Not remember what happened while drinking or using drugs	36%
Feel bad about something done when drunk/high	36%
Drive a car after drinking/using drugs	32%
Miss school because of alcohol/ drugs	32%
Pass out after using alcohol/drugs	27%
Have alcohol-/drug-related health problems	9%
Total	55-56

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023