

SANDAG

CJ BULLETIN

Research findings from
the Criminal Justice
Clearinghouse

2024 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

July 2025

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Highlights

Three in four respondents tested positive for at least one substance

In 2024, three in four (75%) adults tested positive for at least one substance, including marijuana, methamphetamine (meth), cocaine, opiates, and PCP. Over one-third (36%) of respondents tested positive for multiple substances.

One in two respondents tested positive for methamphetamine

Methamphetamine (meth) use remains a prevalent concern in the region. Nearly two-thirds (63%) reported ever trying it, and just under half (49%) tested positive for meth at the time of interview. Compared to other substances, meth had the highest frequency of recent use, averaging 18.7 days in the past 30 days.

Fentanyl and tranquilizers were the most commonly illicitly used prescription drugs

About two in five (41%) respondents reported using prescription drugs without a valid prescription. Fentanyl and tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium) were the most commonly misused substances, each reported by 17% of respondents.

Fentanyl was the most frequently cited drug leading to overdose

Nearly one in five (19%) respondents reported ever experiencing a drug overdose, and among those, almost half (44%) identified fentanyl as the substance involved.

One in three respondents reported a mental health diagnosis

About one in three (34%) respondents said they had been diagnosed with a mental or psychiatric disorder. Diagnoses were more common among White respondents. Notably, nearly half (47%) of those with a diagnosis reported a suicide attempt.

Most respondents have experienced housing instability

Over two-thirds (67%) of respondents reported ever being unhoused, and nearly one-third (31%) said they were unhoused in the past 30 days. Those with a history of being unhoused were significantly more likely to report ever committing a crime to support a drug habit.

Background

This CJ Bulletin, 2024 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region, is one publication in a series that highlights findings from data collected as part of the San Diego County Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) program (formerly known as Substance Abuse Monitoring). This bulletin includes information pertaining to lifetime and recent self-reported drug use, perceived risk and availability of different drugs, characteristics of the population interviewed, and how these factors may be related to drug use.

Since 2004, when federal funding for the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program was suspended, San Diego has been the only site to continue this project uninterrupted. With funding from the SANDAG Criminal Justice Clearinghouse, these data have been reported on an annual basis, providing useful information to policy makers, law enforcement, prevention, and treatment professionals regarding drug use trends and involvement in other risky or illegal behavior over time. In 2024, this data collection effort was generously supported by the San Diego County 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, is gratefully acknowledged.

As part of this project, adults booked in local jails are approached (using a random sampling method) within 48 hours of their booking. If an individual is available and willing to participate in a confidential interview, they are asked a series of questions related to their drug use history and provide a voluntary urine sample for drug testing. In 2024, a total of 229 adults completed the interview and provided a valid urine sample for analysis. This sample includes 140 males (61%) and 89 females (39%), all interviewed at Vista Detention Facility, San Diego Central Jail, or Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility.

What information is collected through these interviews?

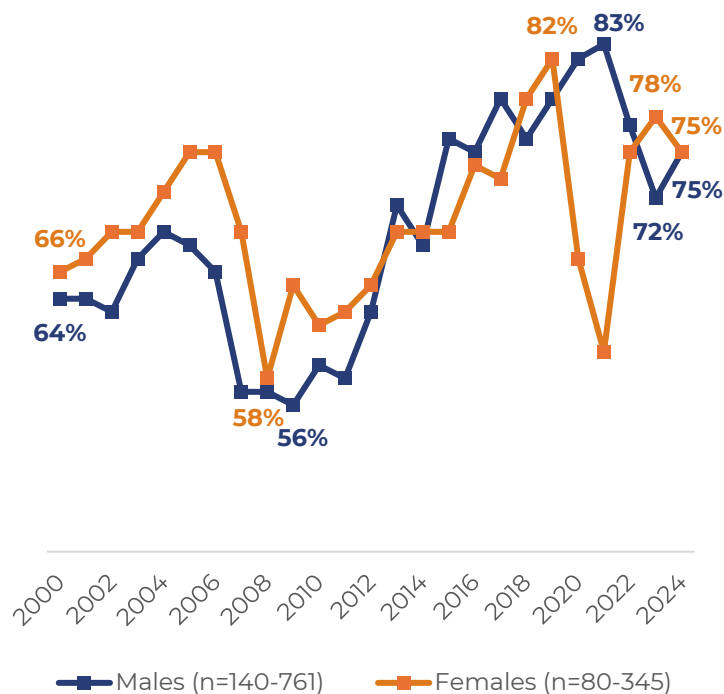
- Positive drug tests trends for any substance **(page 4)**
- Positive drug test trends for multiple substances **(page 5)**
- Drug test trends by substance - marijuana, meth, cocaine, and opiates **(page 6)**
- Characteristics of drug use by drug type **(page 8)**
- Drug market dynamics **(page 9)**
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Substance Use Findings

How many adults tested positive for illicit substances?

In 2024, three-fourths (75%) of adults included in our sample tested positive for either marijuana or an illicit substance, including meth, cocaine, opiates, and PCP.¹ Positive rates were identical for males and females, marking a shift from recent years (Figure 1). In 2021, the largest gap between male (83%) and female (60%) positive rates was recorded, possibly reflecting pandemic-related changes in drug availability, enforcement practices, or booking patterns. By 2024, rates for both genders matched for the first time.

Figure 1: Percentage of Adult Males and Females Positive for a Drug (2000-2024)



Note: Prior to 2013 and since 2015, the percentage of positive was based on marijuana, meth, cocaine, opiates, and PCP. In 2013 and 2014, the PCP test was replaced with a test for alcohol.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

What were the characteristics of the adults interviewed?

Of the 229 adults with completed interviews and urine samples, 140 (61%) were male and 89 (39%) were female. Nearly half (48%) were Hispanic/Latino(a), 27% White, 22% Black/African American, and 3% "other." Fourteen percent (14%) of those interviewed were under the age of 25, 47% between 25 and 39, and 39% 40 and older. The mean age was 37.4 (range: 18 to 73). Sixty-seven percent (67%) were single; 18% divorced, separated, or widowed; and 14% married.

Over two-fifths (44%) were booked for a violent offense as the most serious charge, 24% for a property offense, 17% for a drug offense, and 14% for an "other" offense (any offense that falls outside of the main three categorizations). More than one-third (35%) reported living in the Central Major Statistical Area of the County, 14% in East Suburban, 11% in South Suburban, 10% in North County East, 10% in North County West, 8% in North City, 7% out of the County, and 4% in East County.

¹ The drug test panel continues to include marijuana despite California voters approving Proposition 64 in 2016. Marijuana will continue to be tested while it remains illegal federally because changes in use pre- and post-legalization are expected to continue to be an issue of interest.

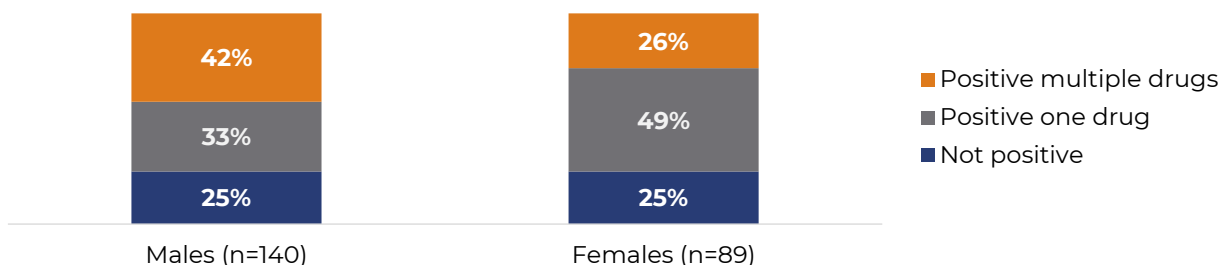
How many adults are polydrug² users?

In 2024, over one-third (36%) of respondents tested positive for multiple drugs, with this pattern more common among males (42%) than females (26%) (Figure 2). Among those with more than one drug detected, the majority (84%) tested positive for two substances, while smaller percentages tested positive for three (13%) or four (2%). Meth and marijuana were the most frequently detected, appearing in 96% and 94% of these cases, respectively. This was followed by opiates, found in 13% of cases, cocaine or crack in 12%, and PCP in just 2%.

How many adults in jail tested positive for just marijuana?

39% of respondents who tested positive for marijuana in 2024 did not test positive for anything else, but 61% did – either for meth, opiates, crack/cocaine, or some other combination.

Figure 2: Percentage of Positive Tests for Multiple Drugs by Gender (2024)

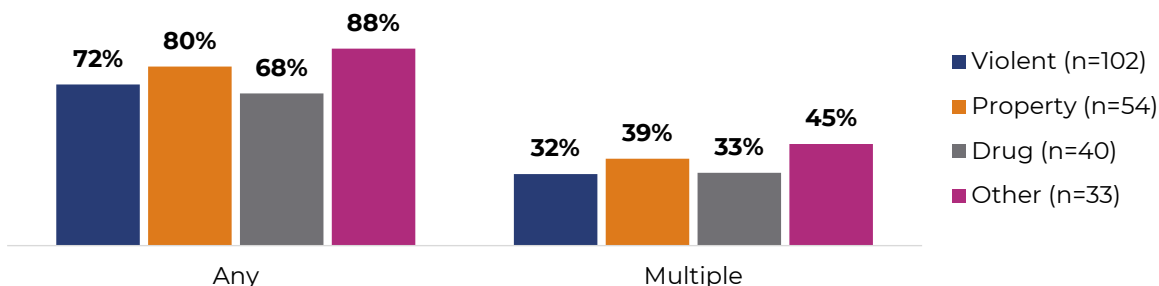


Source: SANDAG, 2024

How do test rates vary by respondents' highest charge?

Because individuals may be booked on multiple charges, they were categorized based on their highest charge. Rates of drug detection did not differ significantly across these categories. The proportion testing positive for any drug ranged from 68% (among those whose highest charge was drug-related) to 88% (among those with an “other” highest charge) (Figure 3). The “other” category showed the highest rates for both any and multiple drug detection (45%), though it also had the smallest sample size. These differences were not statistically significant.

Figure 3: Positive Test for Any or Multiple Drugs by Highest Booking Charge (2024)



Note: “Other” charges include a range of offenses. A few examples include probation violations, probation revocations, obstruction of justice, and public disturbance. Cases with missing information not included.

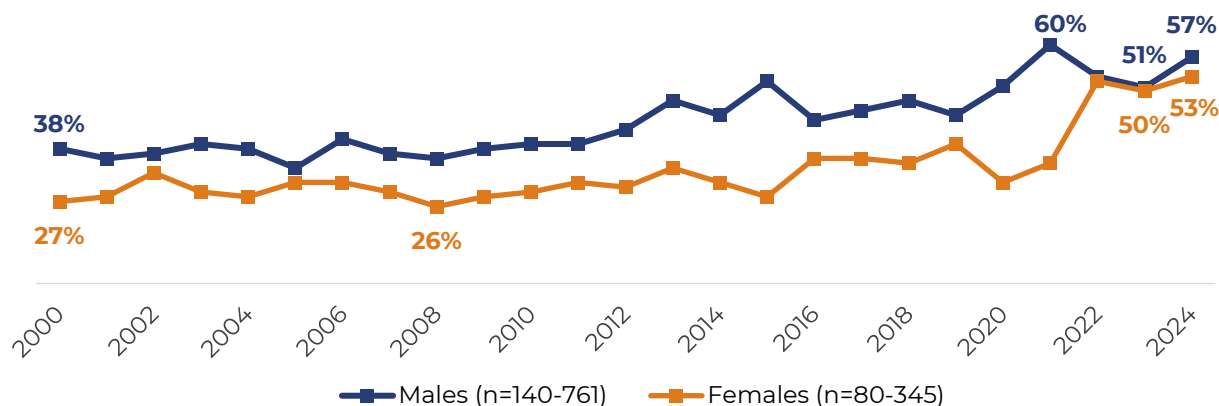
Source: SANDAG, 2024

² Polydrug use refers to the use of two or more psychoactive drugs in combination to achieve a particular effect.

How have positive rates by drug changed over time?

The percentage of males testing positive for **marijuana** (57%) in 2024 increased from the previous year, marking the second-highest rate recorded, following its peak in 2021 (Figure 4). Among females, the positive rate reached a record high—nearly doubling the rate observed in the year 2000 (from 27% to 53%). A closer look at demographics revealed little variation across age groups, though differences were observed by race and ethnicity. Specifically, 64% of Black/African American individuals tested positive for marijuana, compared to 54% of White and Hispanic individuals.

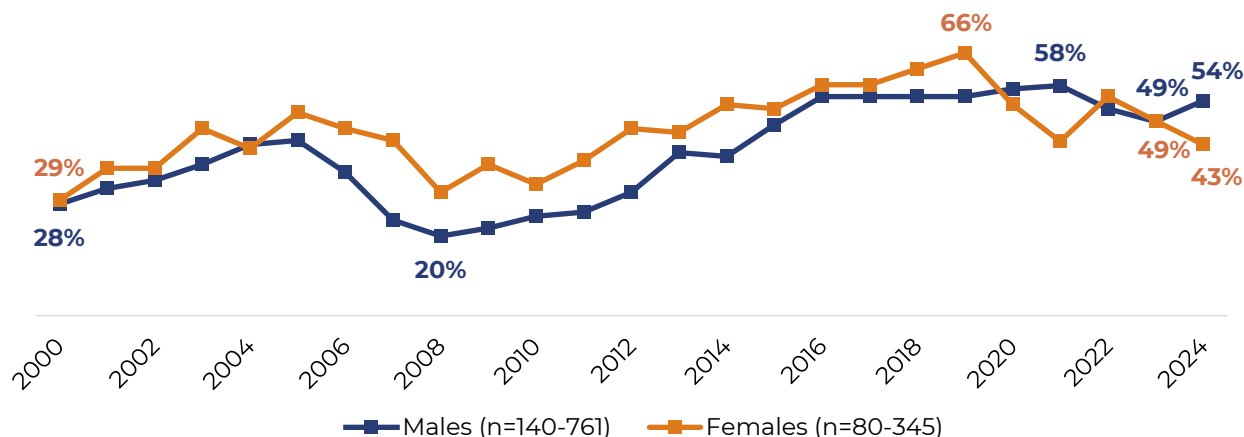
Figure 4: Percentage of Positive Tests for Marijuana by Gender (2000-2024)



Source: SANDAG, 2024

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. While 2023 marked the first year that male and female respondents tested positive for meth at equal rates (49%), in 2024, the rate rose to 54% for males and fell to 43% for females (Figure 5). Unlike marijuana, where rates showed little variation by age group, individuals aged 40 and over were significantly more likely to test positive for meth (66%) than those aged 25–39 (38%) or under 25 (39%). Race and ethnicity were also associated with differences in positive rates: White and Hispanic/Latino(a) individuals had higher positive rates (54% and 50%, respectively), than Black/African American individuals (42%).

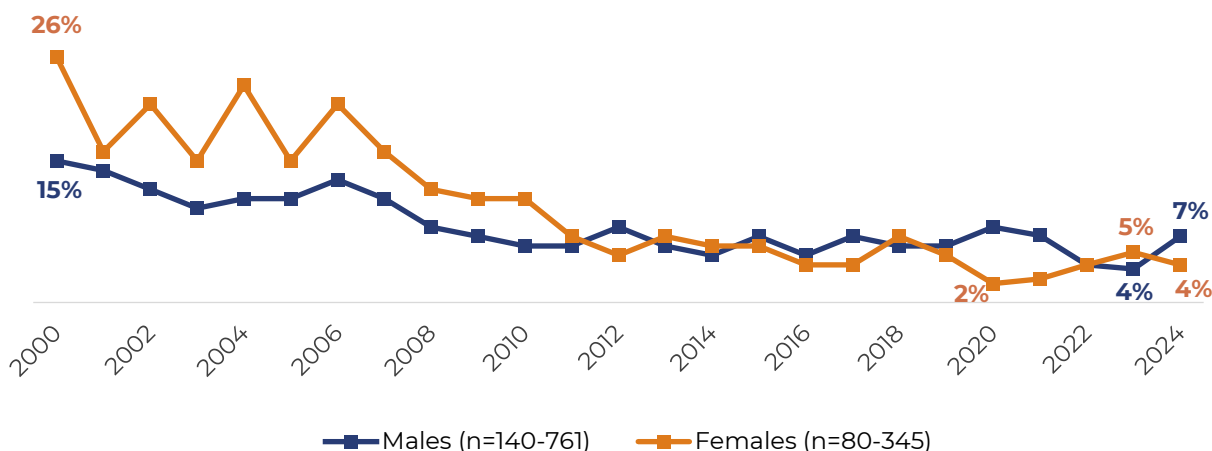
Figure 5: Percentage of Positive Tests for Meth by Gender (2000-2024)



Source: SANDAG, 2024

The percentage of adults testing positive for **cocaine** has sharply declined over the past two decades, with rates among females falling from 26% in 2000 to 4% in 2024—a more than sixfold decrease (Figure 6). Among males, positive test rates dropped by nearly half over the same period (from 15% to 7%). While female rates were consistently higher through the early 2000s, in recent years, positive test rates for both groups appear to have stabilized at relatively low levels. There were no significant differences found by an individual's gender, age, or race/ethnicity.

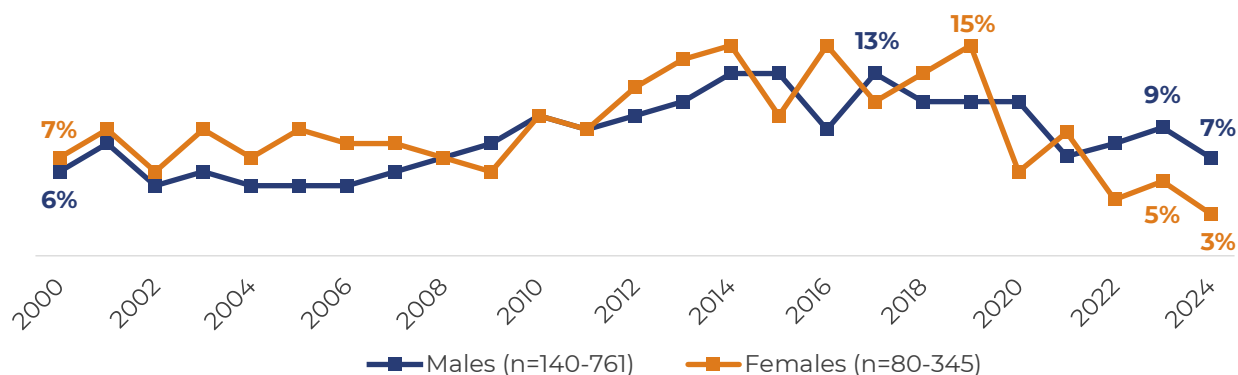
Figure 6: Percentage of Positive Tests for Cocaine by Gender (2000-2024)



Source: SANDAG, 2024

Positive test rates for **opiates**³ have remained relatively low when compared to substances like marijuana and methamphetamine. While a modest increase occurred from 2010 to 2018, with rates peaking at 15% for females and 13% for males, rates have declined since then (Figure 7). By 2024, the percentage of females testing positive for opiates dropped to 3%, the lowest point since data collection began in 2000. Male rates have remained more stable in recent years, hovering around 7%. While there were no significant differences in rates by gender or ethnicity/race, all individuals who tested positive for opiates were older than 25.

Figure 7: Percentage of Positive Tests for Opiates by Gender (2000-2024)



Source: SANDAG, 2024

³ A positive opiate drug test indicates the use of opiates other than heroin, including morphine, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and codeine. However, a key limitation of this test is that it does not yet detect synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.

In 2024, only two individuals (both females) tested positive for **PCP** (not shown).

How do characteristics of drug use vary by drug type?

Marijuana was the most commonly tried drug among respondents, with 88% reporting ever using it. Over half (53%) said it was the first substance they ever tried, typically starting at an average age of 15. Among those who had ever used it, 60% reported using it in the past 12 months, and recent use (past 30 days) averaged 17.3 days (Table 1).

Meth was tried by almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents, with an average initiation age of 21.5 years. Meth had the highest use in the past 12 months, at 76%, as well as the most days used in the past month, averaging 18.7 days (Table 1).

Cocaine was tried by over half (53%) of respondents and at the second youngest average age (20.7), following marijuana. One-third (33%) reported use in the past 12 months, with an average of 6.7 days used in the past 30 days (Table 1).

Heroin was tried by about one-fourth (26%) of respondents and had the oldest average age of first use at 24.0 years. It also had the lowest usage rate in the past 12 months (29%). Of those who reported use in the past 30 days, the average was 13.9 days (Table 1).

Crack was tried by 27% of respondents, with an average initiation age of 23.0 years. About half of those who ever tried it (52%) reported use in the past 12 months, though it had the lowest average number of days used in the past 30 days—3.8. (Table 1).

Table 1: Self-Reported Drug Use Patterns for Common Illicit Drugs

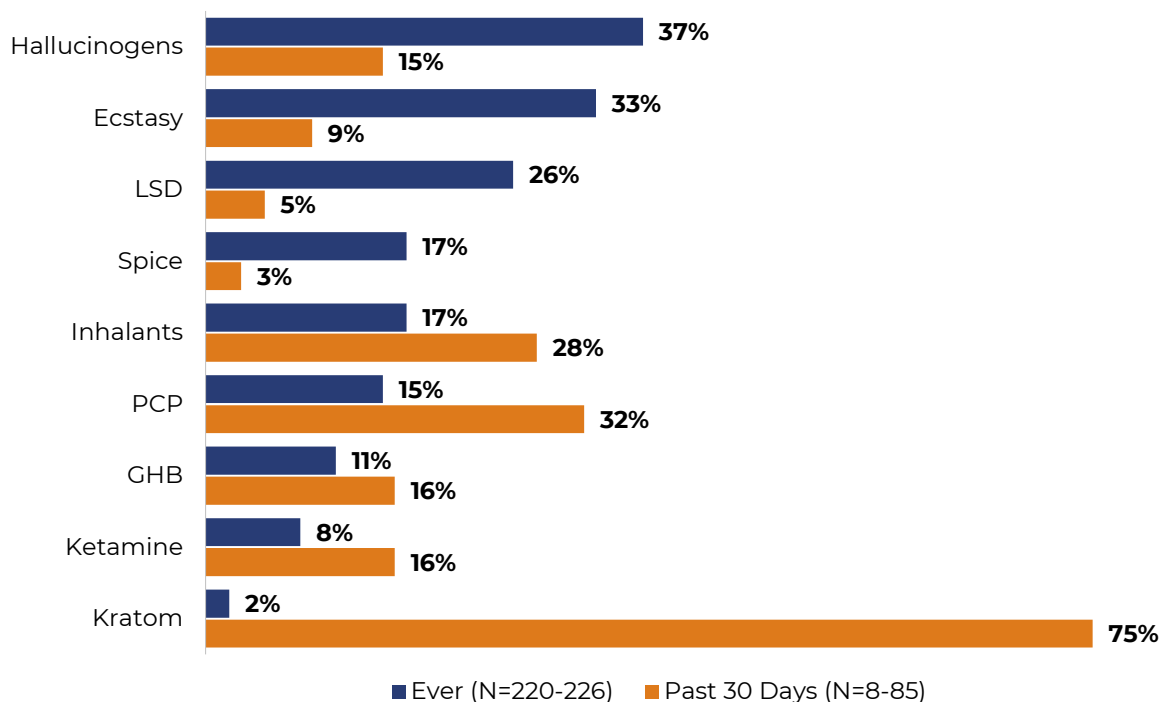
Drug Type	How many have ever tried?	What was the average age at first use?	Of those who have tried it, how many used in the last 12 months?	Of those who have used in the past 30 days, how many days did they use on average?
Marijuana	88%	15.0	60%	17.3
Meth	63%	21.5	76%	18.7
Cocaine	53%	20.7	32%	6.7
Heroin	26%	24.0	29%	13.9
Crack	27%	23.0	52%	3.8

Source: SANDAG, 2024

In addition to these five drugs, interviewed adults also reported having ever tried at least one of nine other illicit substances, including hallucinogens (37%), ecstasy (33%), LSD (26%), spice (17%), inhalants (17%), PCP (15%), GHB (11%), ketamine (8%), and kratom (2%) (Figure 8).⁴ While lifetime use of these substances was generally lower than more commonly used drugs, several stood out for relatively high recent use (past 30 days). Some, like kratom and PCP, were reported by a small number of individuals overall but appeared to be used more frequently or more recently by those who had tried them. Others, such as hallucinogens, ecstasy, and LSD, were more commonly tried but showed lower rates of past 30-day use.

⁴ Kratom is a tropical tree native to Southeast Asia with leaves that contain compounds with psychotropic effects. There is no statewide legislation or regulation of kratom in California, so it remains legal and accessible to possess, consume, or sell in most jurisdictions. However, two cities—San Diego and Oceanside—have enacted local bans.

Figure 8: Percentage of Respondents Who Used an Illicit Substance Ever and in the Last 30 Days



Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

How do drug market dynamics vary for each drug type, according to respondents?

Over the years, respondents have been asked a series of questions regarding drugs they have obtained, including what they traded to get them (cash and/or non-cash means), how easy they were to obtain, and whether they were acquired in the same area where the respondent reported living. The data presented here reflect only those who reported obtaining each drug in the past 30 days.

As Table 2 shows:⁵

- Across the six listed substances, marijuana was most likely to be reported as “very easy” to obtain (75%), while fentanyl was the least (33%).
- Excluding fentanyl, at least 71% of respondents obtained their drug of choice within the major statistical area (MSA) where they lived.⁶ Crack (100%) and cocaine (94%) were most commonly obtained locally. In contrast, only 50% of those who obtained fentanyl in the past 30 days did so within their local area.
- Meth was most commonly obtained through non-cash means (67%), while heroin was most often paid for with cash (78%).

⁵ Percentage comparisons should be interpreted with caution, as sample sizes vary across drug types.

⁶ 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/>.

Table 2: Drug Acquisition Patterns Among Respondents Who Obtained Each Drug in the Past 30 Days

Category	Marijuana (n=98-106)	Meth (n=78-85)	Heroin (n=8-9)	Cocaine (n=16-18)	Crack (n=7)	Fentanyl (n=18-21)
Very easy to obtain	75%	44%	38%	39%	57%	33%
Got in same MSA where they live	73%	71%	71%	94%	100%	50%
Paid with cash	67%	62%	78%	67%	71%	65%
Got with non-cash ways	55%	67%	33%	50%	57%	45%

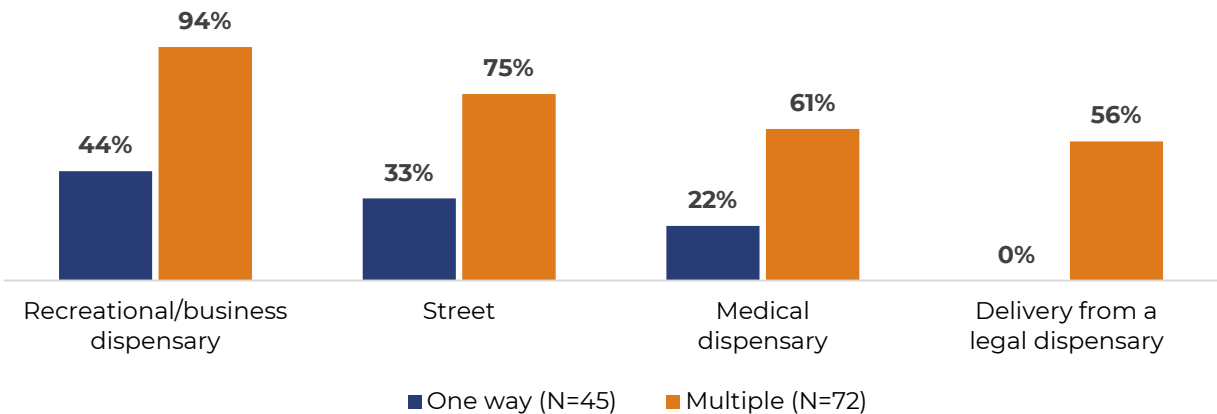
Source: SANDAG 2024

How respondents obtain marijuana

Since California legalized recreational marijuana through the passing of Proposition 64 in 2016, access to the drug has changed considerably. Understanding how respondents acquire marijuana, whether through legal or non-legal means, is important for interpreting patterns of use, availability, and preferences. The following analysis examines these key points:

- The **two most common** ways to obtain marijuana over the past 12 months were from a legal recreational/business dispensary (69%) and from the street or a dealer (54%).
- The most commonly reported sources were recreational or business dispensaries, the street, and medical dispensaries—regardless of whether respondents used one or multiple sources (Figure 9). Notably, 75% of those using multiple sources still obtained marijuana from the street, indicating that despite legalization, illicit markets remain a significant source for many. Among multiple-source users, 56% also reported obtaining marijuana through dispensary delivery.

Figure 9: Methods of Obtaining Marijuana in the Past 12 Months



Note: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages based on multiple responses.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

Respondents' preferred sources followed a similar pattern, with nearly half (46%) choosing recreational or business dispensaries as their preferred method. Figure 10 highlights the reasons behind these preferences. Those favoring legal recreational/business dispensaries most often cited better quality, while those opting for street purchases emphasized ease, convenience, and the absence of taxes.

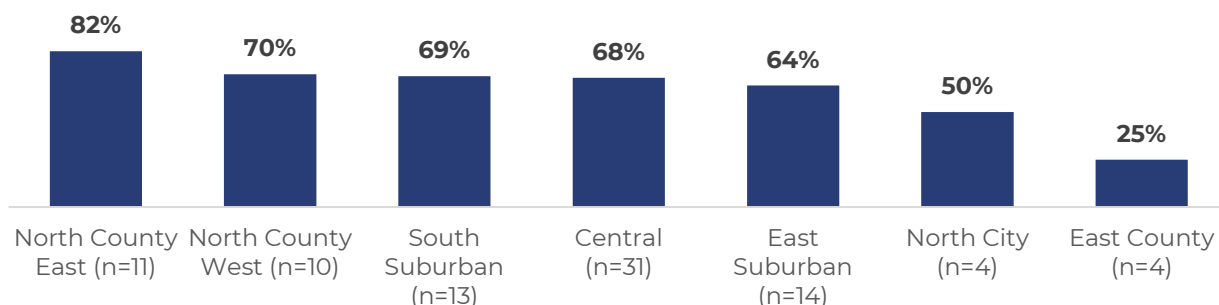
Figure 10: Top Reasons for Preferring Different Means of Obtaining Marijuana

Recreational	Medical	Delivery	On Street
Better quality 41%	Better quality 56%	Easier 73%	Easier 48%
Safer 32%	Convenient 39%	Safer 27%	Convenient 38%
Easier 29%	Easier 39%		No taxes 21%

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Residents across San Diego County generally reported obtaining marijuana at a recreational/business or medical dispensary in the MSA where they lived, ranging from 25% in East County to 82% in North County East (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Percentage of Residents Who Obtained Marijuana at a Recreational/Business Dispensary in the Same MSA in Which They Live



Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Additionally, more than one-fourth (28%) of respondents reported ever having had a medical marijuana card, and 22% of those still did at the time of interview. When asked about the medical condition for which they obtained the card, the most commonly cited reasons were physical pain and anxiety—with a few also mentioning sleep issues, depression, and ADHD.

Personal acquisition of meth and heroin

The findings below are based on a series of questions designed to determine the quantities of meth and heroin individuals obtain for personal use, focusing specifically on their most recent purchase. Although respondents reported amounts in various forms—such as grams, dollars, lines, and hits—only quantities reported in grams were included in this analysis. The median amount obtained was 1.9 grams for meth and 1.0 gram for heroin (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Amounts of Meth and Heroin Obtained for Personal Use

Meth (N=64)	Heroin (N=14)
Median amount obtained: 1.9 grams	Median amount obtained: 1.0 gram
Range: 0.1 to 224.0 grams	Range: 0.5 to 3.5 grams

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Cross-border drug trafficking

About one in five adults booked in local jails (19%) in the 2024 sample reported being approached to transport or assist in bringing drugs across the U.S.–Mexico border. Additionally, 10% said they had actually crossed the border to transport drugs into the U.S. Though these questions were asked independently and therefore not causally linked, 43% of those that reported having been approached also disclosed smuggling drugs.

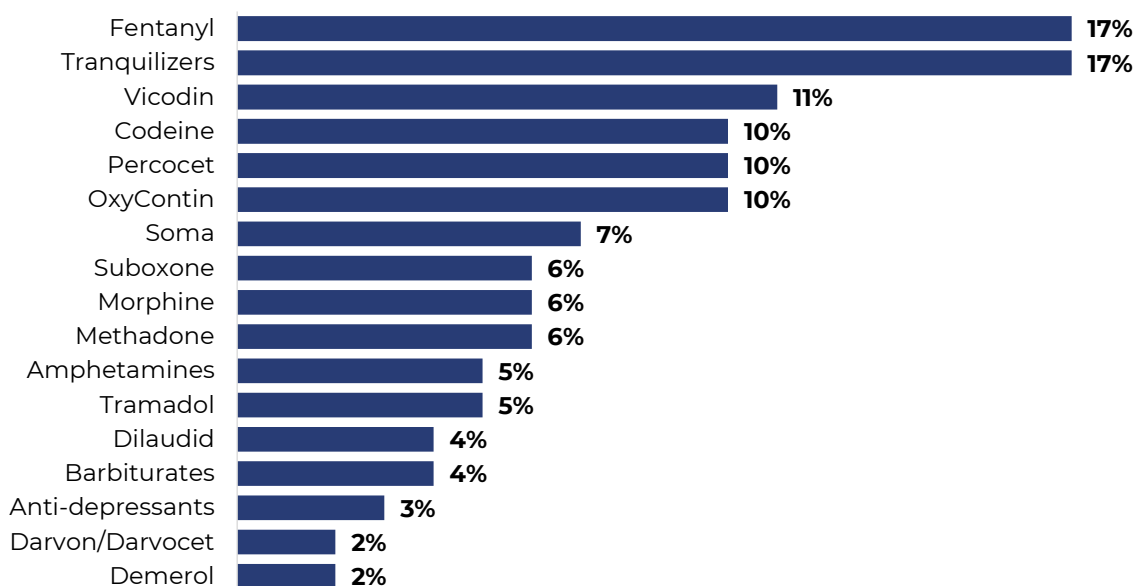
When asked why they transported drugs, 57% said they were paid to do so, 43% reported doing it for personal use, and 26% said they intended to sell the drugs themselves (respondents could select more than one reason). Among those who reported traveling to Mexico for drugs, the substances most commonly obtained were methamphetamine (39%), marijuana (35%), heroin (26%), cocaine (13%), pharmaceuticals (13%), and fentanyl (9%).

What do we know about respondents' prescription drug use?

Respondents described whether they had ever used prescription drugs with a prescription (legally), without a prescription (illegally), or both. In 2024, 41% of respondents said they had ever used a prescription drug without a prescription, with fentanyl and tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium) being the most commonly reported (Figure 13). The share of respondents reporting non-prescribed fentanyl use has declined for the second consecutive year, yet for the first time, it was reported as often as tranquilizers. Notably, among those who reported ever using fentanyl without a prescription, 40% said they had done so in the past 30 days — a higher recent-use rate than for any other prescription drug (not shown in figure).

41% of all respondents reported ever using **prescription drugs** without a prescription

Figure 13: Percentage of Respondents who Reported Using Prescription Drugs Without a Prescription



Total = 219-225

Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

While reported rates of non-prescribed drug use were similar across genders, higher rates were reported among White (43%) and Hispanic (43%) respondents, compared to Black/African American respondents (35%). Age differences were also apparent: 44% of individuals aged 40 and over reported non-prescribed use, compared to 17% of those under the age of 25. Notably, respondents who reported non-prescribed drug use were significantly more likely to test positive for meth (64% versus 39%).

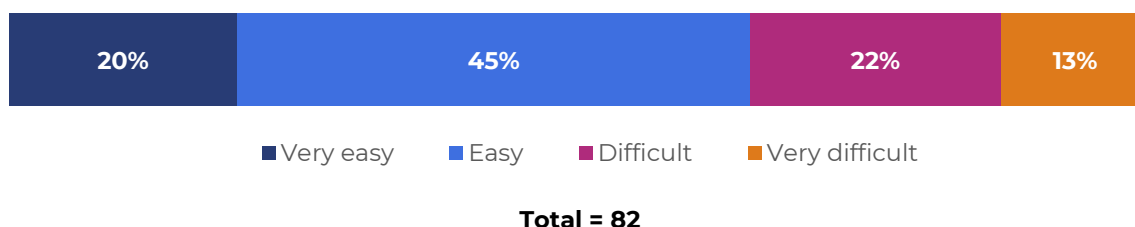
Figure 14: Characteristics of Respondents who Illicitly Used Prescription Drugs



Source: SANDAG, 2024

When asked about the ease of illegally obtaining prescription drugs, over three-fifths (65%) of users said it was “very easy” or “easy” to obtain, a rate similar to recent years (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Perceived Ease of Obtaining Prescription Drugs Without a Prescription



Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

The most common ways respondents have obtained prescription drugs illegally included being given them (88%), purchasing them (39%), or stealing them (16%) (Figure 16). Among those who obtained drugs by being given or stealing them, sources were usually friends or family, with strangers playing a minimal role. Of those who had illegally purchased prescription drugs, nearly one in two (47%) have suspected the pills they bought were counterfeit. Additionally, a small number of individuals (5%) reported engaging in “doctor shopping” to obtain prescriptions—nearly all (92%) of whom said they were successful.⁷

Figure 16: Sources of Prescription Drugs by Method of Illegal Acquisition

Given (88%)	Bought (39%)	Taken or stolen (16%)
Friend 73%		Family 69%
Casual acquaintance 44%		Friend 54%
Stranger 16%		Casual acquaintance 23%
Family member 15%		Stranger 15%

Note: Percentages exceed 100% due to multiple responses. Cases with missing information excluded.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

⁷ “Doctor shopping” is the practice of attempting to persuade a doctor(s) to prescribe a drug that is not actually needed for a mental or medical condition.

Link between prescription drugs and heroin

For some, prescription drugs are a gateway to heroin use. Nearly one-third (29%) of heroin users (17 individuals) said they were dependent on prescription opiates before transitioning to heroin. Most (75%) reported doing so intentionally, using heroin as a substitute. When asked which prescriptions they had been addicted to, the most commonly reported were OxyContin (67%) and Percocet (33%). The most common reasons for switching included heroin being easier to obtain, producing a better high, and costing less.

What does fentanyl use look like among the adult population in San Diego County jails?

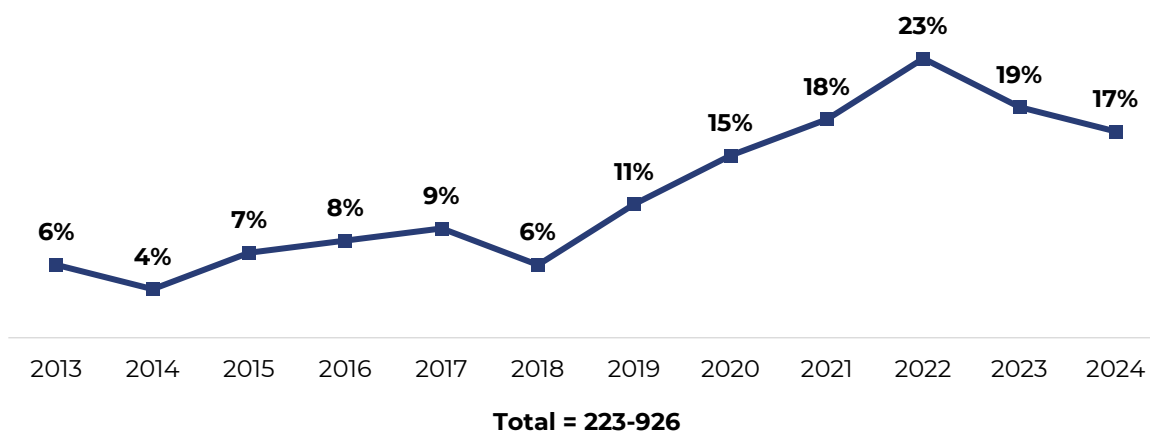
Given the widespread concern over the high risk of overdose and fatality associated with fentanyl, a closer examination was necessary to understand the patterns, characteristics and motivations of fentanyl use within San Diego County. In 2024, one in five (20%) respondents reported ever using fentanyl, and 17% indicated they had used it without a prescription (Figure 13). The relevance of this analysis is further underscored by the fact that nearly one in five (19%) adults interviewed reported experiencing a drug overdose, and among those, almost half (44%) identified fentanyl as the substance involved.

Fentanyl is a potent synthetic opioid typically used in medical settings for severe pain mitigation. Illicit fentanyl use has become increasingly common and fatal as individuals seek out a “stronger high.” Most often, fentanyl is mixed with other drugs including heroin, meth and cocaine.

Rates of fentanyl use

As part of the broader set of drug use questions, respondents were asked if they had ever used fentanyl with a prescription (legally), without a prescription (illegally), or both. As previously mentioned, nearly one-fifth (17%) of interviewed adults reported illegal use of fentanyl, making it the prescription drug most commonly used without a prescription, along with tranquilizers. Following a rise from 6% in 2018 to a peak of 23% in 2022, the 2024 rate represents the second consecutive decrease of illegal fentanyl use (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Illegal Use of Fentanyl Over the Years (2013-2024)



Note: Cases with missing information are not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Characteristics of fentanyl users

Fentanyl users displayed distinct demographic and behavioral characteristics. This was especially evident in age of initiation: on average, fentanyl users started using the drug much later than users of other substances—35.5 years old compared to 21.5 for meth and 24 for heroin (not shown). Additionally, compared to those who had not used fentanyl, individuals who had were more likely to be Hispanic (54% vs. 48%) or White (31% vs. 23%), and less likely to be Black (13% vs. 24%) (Table 3). These individuals were also more likely to report having a previous arrest, experiencing homelessness, receiving substance use treatment, and facing mental health challenges. These patterns were consistent with findings from the previous year.

Table 3: Demographics and Characteristics of Fentanyl vs. Non-Fentanyl Users

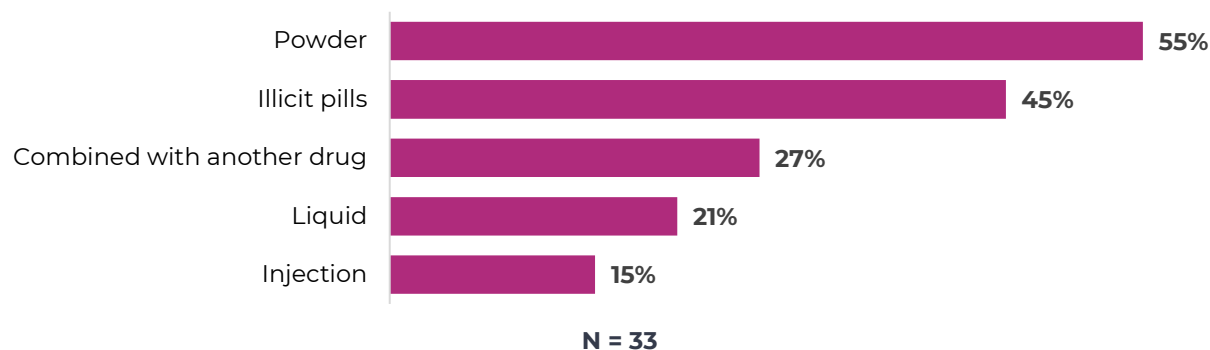
Characteristics	Reported fentanyl use (N=36-39)	No fentanyl use (N=169-176)
Hispanic	54%	48%
Black	13%	24%
White	31%	23%
Previous arrest	82%	75%
Experienced homelessness	74%	63%
Drug use led to crime to support habit	51%	20%
Previous drug overdose	49%	13%
Received substance use treatment	47%	26%
Diagnosed with mental disorder	44%	30%
Drug use led to psychotic episode	32%	15%

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Methods of use

To better understand how fentanyl is used, respondents were asked about the ways in which they administer and consume it. Of those who ever illegally used the drug, reported methods included powder (55%), illicit pills (45%), combined with another drug (27%), liquid forms (i.e., nasal spray, eye drops) (21%), and injection (15%) (Figure 18). One individual reported using patches. All individuals who reported mixing fentanyl with another substance cited meth.

Figure 18: Common Forms in Which Fentanyl Is Consumed



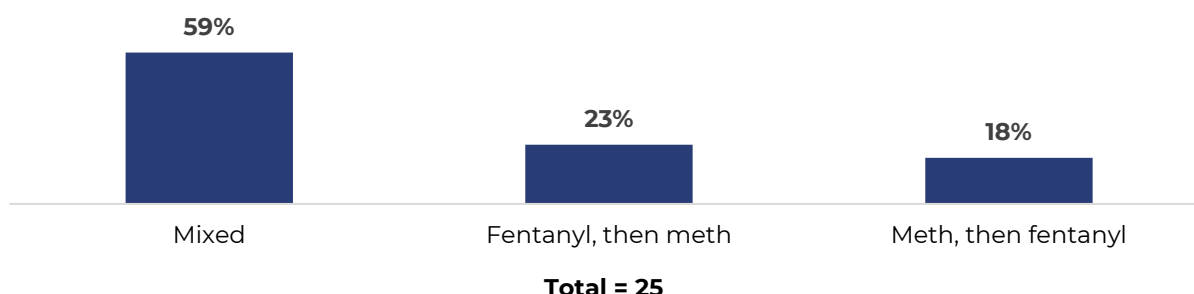
Note: Percentages exceed 100% due to multiple responses. Cases with missing information excluded.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

Of the 30 respondents who disclosed their preferred methods of using fentanyl, nearly half (47%) said they preferred consuming it in pill form, followed by powder (40%). A few individuals also reported preferring to smoke it or use patches. Among the 18 respondents who reported using powder fentanyl, 11 (61%) had used it in the past 12 months, and all said they preferred smoking it over ingesting it.

Fentanyl and meth

Considering fentanyl is commonly used in conjunction with other drugs, respondents were asked about their experiences purchasing and using both substances together. Among adults that reported using meth, 12% disclosed intentionally seeking meth with fentanyl in it—a notably smaller figure compared to the 21% reported in the previous year. Additionally, 17% said they knowingly used fentanyl-laced meth. In terms of how these drugs are consumed together, most (59%) respondents said they mix both substances (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Reported Methods of Consuming Meth and Fentanyl



*Note: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages based on multiple responses.
Source: SANDAG, 2024*

Test strips and unintentional consumption

To gauge precautionary behaviors around fentanyl use, respondents were asked about their use of fentanyl test strips. About one in ten (12%) interviewed adults said they had used test strips before. Nearly half (45%) said they had not used them but would if they were available; among this group, 59% tested positive for meth at the time of interview. Of those willing to use test strips, the most common reason was to check for fentanyl (53%), followed by wanting to stay safe (23%), prevent death (16%), or avoid overdose (7%).

Nearly one in three (32%)
believed they had
unintentionally consumed
fentanyl due to their reaction
to a drug

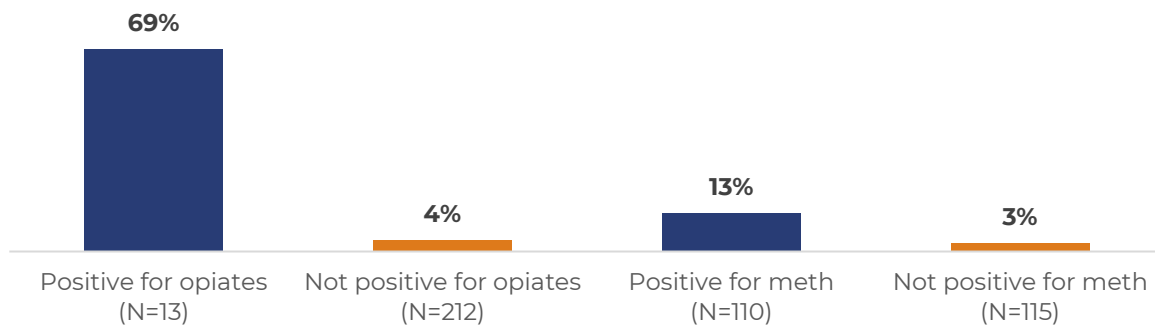
Notably, almost one in three (32%) of all interviewed adults believed that drugs they had used in the past contained fentanyl, even if they had not been told so, based on how the drugs affected them. These findings highlight not only a general concern about fentanyl exposure but also a willingness to take precaution and reduce harm if given the opportunity.

Motivations and deterrents for purchasing fentanyl

Despite the rise of illegal fentanyl use in recent years, the majority of interviewed adults (92%) said they would not purchase it. Among the 17 adults who would, there were differences among subgroups. Those who tested positive for opiates or meth were significantly more likely to say they would purchase fentanyl (69% and 13%, respectively), compared to those

who did not test positive (4% and 3%, respectively) (Figure 20).⁸ Additionally, adults aged 25 to 39 reported a higher willingness to purchase it than those under 25 (9% versus 3%).

Figure 20: Percentage of Respondents Willing to Purchase a Drug Containing Fentanyl by Positive Test*



*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

When asked why they would purchase fentanyl, over three-fifths (63%) cited a desire for a stronger high, 44% said opiates were their drug of choice, 25% mentioned its effectiveness for pain relief or sleep, and 19% noted its low cost. Notably, among those willing to purchase fentanyl-laced drugs, the majority (72%) reported doing so intentionally. In contrast, most respondents who said they would not buy fentanyl cited its dangerous or potentially deadly nature (80%).

Counterfeit oxycodone pills (M30s or “blues”)

Given the increased prevalence of counterfeit oxycodone pills—commonly referred to as M30s, blues, or M-boxes—interviewed adults were asked about their use of these pills.⁹ Fewer than one in ten (9%) reported ever using blues. Among those 20 individuals, 8 (40%) said they had used them within the last 12 months, primarily through smoking or oral ingestion.

The majority of users (75%) were aware that the pills likely contained fentanyl, highlighting a level of risk awareness. Notably, 20% reported having overdosed while using them. Among the eight individuals who had experience with both blues and powder fentanyl, seven (88%) expressed a preference for powder, citing its stronger potency (83%) and better quality (17%).

What do we know about adults’ alcohol use?

The majority of interviewed adults (81%) reported at least one prior binge-drinking episode (defined as five drinks or more for males and four drinks or more for females during one occasion). Nearly two-fifths (39%) drank alcohol in the 24 hours prior to their arrest.

Additional analyses revealed that:

- Among individuals with a history of binge drinking, the majority (68%) reported doing so within the past 12 months, and 42% of those had binge drunk within the past 30 days.

⁸ The number of respondents who tested positive for opiates was relatively small compared to other subgroups; however, results were still statistically significant.

⁹ Daniulaityte, Raminta et al. 2022. “They Say It’s Fentanyl, but They Honestly Look like Perc 30s: Initiation and Use of Counterfeit Fentanyl Pills.” *Harm Reduction Journal* 19 (1).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-022-00634-4>.

- Males were significantly more likely than females to report ever engaging in binge drinking (87% versus 70%).
- Adults under 25 were more likely to report drinking alcohol within 24 hours of their current arrest (48%), compared to those aged 25–39 and those 40 and older (37%, respectively).

Figure 21: Respondent Alcohol Use History by Gender

Males (n=60-158)	Females (n=31-77)
87% ever binge drank	70% ever binge drank
16.8 average age first binged	18.9 average age first binged
68% binge drank past 12 months	68% binge drank past 12 months
45% binge drank past 30 days	37% binge drank past 30 days
41% drank alcohol in the 24 hours leading to current arrest	36% drank alcohol in the 24 hours leading to current arrest

Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

What do we know about tobacco use and vaping?

Given the growing popularity of e-cigarettes and vapes over the last several years, respondents answered a series of questions regarding their vaping history, the types of products ever vaped, and the frequency in which they use vaping products, if any.

Tobacco use:

- Overall, 63% of adults reported currently using tobacco products.
- Usage was highest among White respondents (72%), compared to 67% of Black/African American and 57% of Hispanic respondents.
- Among different age groups, those under 25 years old were significantly less likely to use tobacco than those aged 25–39 or 40 and over.
- Only 9% reported tobacco was the first substance they ever used, much lower than alcohol (33%) and marijuana (53%).

Vaping history and trends:

- Nearly two-thirds (64%) of adults interviewed reported ever vaping.
- Vaping was most common among younger adults, with 70% of those aged 25–39 and 68% of those under 25 reporting use, compared to 55% of those aged 40 and over.
- Nearly three-fourths (74%) of adults who had ever vaped said they had done so in the last 30 days, and of those, the average number of days vaped was 15.7 (range: 1 to 30).
- When asked what they had vaped, the most common answer was flavored nicotine (84%), followed by THC/marijuana (44%), and non-flavored nicotine (41%).

Risk Factors and Support Needs

Prior Justice System Involvement and Criminal Activity

Understanding individuals' prior involvement with the justice system provides essential context for assessing their risk of recidivism. This section covers key risk factors such as: respondents' histories of arrests and incarcerations, drug distribution and firearm possession, gang involvement, and experiences related to sex-work.

Arrests and incarcerations

- In 2024, just under four in five respondents (77%) reported having been previously arrested, with a median of 5.0 prior arrests.
- About three in four respondents (74%) had been previously booked in jail, and 30% had served time in prison. Males were significantly more likely than females to report prior prison time (38% vs. 17%).
- On average, males were 21.4 years old at the time of their first adult arrest, compared to 23.8 for females. When asked about the nature of their first adult arrest, respondents cited property crimes (27%), drug-related offenses (27%), violent crimes (26%), other offenses (22%), and weapons offenses (10%).¹⁰
- Forty-one percent (41%) reported being arrested as a juvenile; male respondents were significantly more likely to report this (49%) than females (28%).
- When asked what their first arrest as a juvenile was for, respondents most frequently said a property crime (49%), a violent crime (24%) or a drug-related crime (17%).

Involvement in drug distribution

- One in three (33%) respondents reported involvement in drug sales or distribution. Males were significantly more likely than females to report this (40% versus 22%). For many, involvement was recent; 43% said their participation occurred within the past 12 months.

Link between crime and drug use

- Twenty-seven percent (27%) of interviewed adults reported they have committed a crime to support a drug habit.
 - This percentage was even higher for those who said they had previously been convicted of a felony (76%) compared to those who had not (24%).
 - Respondents with a history of homelessness were also significantly more likely to report this (87% versus 13%).
- Of those who admitted committing a crime to support a drug habit, 90% said they committed a property crime.
- At the time of committing the crime(s), most respondents were using either meth (58%), heroin (18%), or marijuana (18%).

¹⁰ Percentages based on multiple responses.

Firearms

- Just under two-fifths (39%) of respondents said they had been threatened with a gun. Of those, 20% were threatened in the last 30 days prior to the interview.
- Over one-third (36%) reported feeling unsafe in their neighborhood due to the possibility of shootings.
- More than one-fourth (28%) said they had ever possessed a firearm—defined as owning, using, carrying, borrowing, sharing, or holding for someone. Among those, about one in four (24%) said did so in the past 30 days.
- When asked how they acquired the firearm, most said they bought it (63%), received it as a gift (19%), or inherited it (12%). Others reported trading something for it (9%) or holding it for someone else (7%).
- Access was generally described as easy—52% said it was “easy” and 19% “very easy” to obtain.
- Of those who had possessed a firearm, 12% reported ever purchasing a ghost gun.
- Thirteen adults (22%) who had ever possessed a firearm said they had carried one while committing a crime. These incidents most commonly involved drug deals (five individuals), robberies (four), assaults (two), and burglaries (two).

Exchanging sex/pimping/pandering

- One in ten (10%) said they had ever exchanged sex for money, drugs, or other things.
 - Of the 23 individuals who reported this, 78% were female and 22% were male. Four—all females—said they had a pimp, and all had been given drugs.
- Fifteen percent (15%) said they had ever been approached by someone offering to pimp or prostitute them.
 - This was significantly more common among females (25%) than males (9%).
 - Individuals with a history of homelessness were more than twice as likely to report this compared to those without such a history (19% vs. 8%).
- Five respondents (2%) reported being involved in pimping or pandering activities.
- The average age at which respondents first exchanged sex for something was 20.3 years, with a range from 12 to 35.
- Among those who had ever exchanged sex, five females (22%) reported doing so in the last 30 days specifically. Of these, four expressed interest in receiving help to stop.

Criminal involvement

77% prior arrests

41% arrested as a juvenile

33% have participated in drug distribution

27% committed a crime to support drug habit

28% have possessed a firearm

Exchanging sex/pimping/pandering

15% approached for pimping/pandering

10% history of exchanging sex and/or sexual favors for money, drugs, or other things

Gang involvement

19% history of gang involvement

Involvement began at 15.2 years of age, on average

Post-incarceration support

25% received re-entry services after incarceration

Housing was the main need reported after incarceration

Gang Involvement

- About one in five (19%) adults reported some type of gang involvement, beginning at an average age of 15.2 years (range: 5 to 40).
- Males were more likely than females to report gang involvement (23% vs. 14%).
- Of the 43 adults who reported any type of gang involvement, over half (53%) said they had this contact within the past five years.
- Among those, six adults (27%) said they spend time with a gang but have never been members, while another five (23%) disclosed being current gang members. A combined 11 individuals (50%) mentioned no longer being affiliated, either through ending formal membership or ceasing to hang out with them.
- When those individuals who ended their affiliation with a gang were asked why they had done so, the most common reasons were wanting to avoid or get out of the criminal justice system (36%), followed by growing out of it or getting tired of the lifestyle (27%).
- Those who reported a history of gang affiliation were significantly more likely to have been arrested as a juvenile compared to individuals without such history (75% versus 32%).

Post-incarceration supervision and support

- Among those who had served time in prison, 78% said they also had been on parole—28% of whom were still on parole at the time of the interview.
- About three-fourths (73%) of those with a prior arrest reported having previously been on probation, and 52% were currently on probation at the time of the interview.
- One in four (25%) individuals who had spent time in custody reported receiving reentry services, either while incarcerated or after their release. The most common services were substance use programs or treatment (49%) and housing assistance (16%). A few participants mentioned attending programs for anger management or domestic violence, employment, and education. Only two individuals said they had received reentry support related to mental health treatment.
- When asked about their biggest needs upon reentry after incarceration, the most common responses were housing (43%), substance use treatment (18%), employment (16%), and transportation (11%).

Mental Health Needs

Mental health has been a key area of focus within broader substance use monitoring, given its strong links to substance use and justice system involvement. This section summarizes respondents' reported mental health conditions, treatment history, medication adherence, and experiences with suicidal ideation.

Nearly half (47%) of respondents with a mental health diagnosis reported a suicide attempt.

Mental health challenges

- Around one in three (34%) adults reported they had ever been diagnosed with a mental or psychiatric disorder. Notably, about one in two (48%) White respondents reported this—significantly more likely than Black/African American (36%) and Hispanic (28%) respondents.

- Over one in three (35%) reported they had previously stayed at least overnight for mental health treatment at a hospital or other facility.
- Of those who had ever been admitted to a mental health or psychiatric facility for at least an overnight stay, the median number of stays was 2 (range: 1 to 30). On average, they were 23 years old when they were first admitted (range: 7 to 56).
- Nearly half (46%) of those who had been admitted to a mental health facility said they were under the influence of alcohol or other drugs at the time it happened. Most respondents reported being on meth (58%).
- Almost all of those with a diagnosis (91%) said they had been prescribed medication for their disorder. Of those 70 adults, 46% had a current prescription and of those, 41% were not taking them as prescribed.
- Respondents were asked if they had ever taken a drug that led to a psychotic episode. Psychosis is a condition characterized by delusions and hallucinations and is commonly associated with mental illness. One in five (20%) responded affirmatively, with meth most frequently cited as leading to this occurrence (71%).
- Over one-third (36%) reported being diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and a majority of them were prescribed medication for it (71%). Of those with a prescription, half (50%) said they began using another drug as a substitute for their ADD or ADHD medication.
- More than one-fourth (27%) of respondents said they had attempted suicide and 37% said they had seriously thought about it. Individuals with a mental health diagnosis were significantly more likely to report a suicide attempt (47% versus 17% without a diagnosis).

Mental Health

34% mental health diagnosis

41% not taking current medication for mental health issues as prescribed

35% admitted overnight to a mental health facility

20% experienced drug-induced psychosis. Meth was the most common catalyst

37% seriously considered suicide

27% previously attempted suicide

Social Determinants of Risk and Well-being

Education, employment, family support and stable housing are critical to reducing recidivism risk. This section covers information on respondents' educational attainment, employment status, health insurance coverage, family and child welfare involvement, and histories of homelessness and foster care. Housing instability was widespread among respondents and often linked to prior justice involvement, substance use, and systemic barriers to stability.

Education, employment, and insurance

- Nearly half of all respondents (46%) reported having a high school diploma or GED, and 28% said they had some college experience or a two-year associate degree.
- At the time of their arrest, 39% of respondents were employed (full- or part-time), 32% were unemployed but actively seeking work, and 21% were unemployed and not looking—highlighting opportunities for targeted support.
- More than one in five (22%) reported not having health insurance at the time of the interview.

- Less than one in ten respondents (7%) reported having previously served in the military; all had been discharged at the time of the interview.

Foster care involvement

- One in five (20%) adults reported having been in foster care, and 40% of those said they aged out of the system—meaning they exited foster care upon reaching the maximum eligible age.
- Among those with a history of foster care, a majority (84%) reported current or past experiences of homelessness, highlighting a strong link between foster care involvement and housing instability.

Dependent children

- Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents reported having children. Females were significantly more likely (75%) to report having children than males (54%).
- One in five (20%) reported currently living with a child, whether or not their own. Females were significantly more likely to report living with a child, compared to males (30% versus 14%).
- Nearly one-fourth (24%) reported prior Child Welfare System (CWS) contact, and 19% (six individuals) had an open case at the time of the interview.

Homelessness

- More than two-thirds (67%) of respondents reported having ever been unhoused, and nearly one-third (31%) said they were unhoused in the past 30 days.
- In the 12 months prior to the interview, 29% said they were unhoused most of the time.
- Respondents first became unhoused at a median age of 24 (range: 6 to 57). Most (80%) said their first experience of being unhoused occurred while living in San Diego County.
- The most commonly reported reasons for losing housing included loss of family (23%), financial hardship (19%), drug use or addiction (16%), job loss (16%), being kicked out or running away from home (16%), and mental health issues (7%). Several individuals also cited abuse/violence, divorce, incarceration, and disability.
- Among those who had been unhoused in the past 12 months, over half (52%) reported most often staying in San Diego's Central MSA. Other regions included East Suburban (15%), South Suburban (8%), North County West (8%), East County (8%), North County East (4%), out of the County (3%), and North City (1%).

Education, employment, and insurance

32% unemployed and seeking work

22% no health insurance

16% no high school degree

Foster care

20% prior foster care system involvement

Children

62% have children

24% prior Child Welfare Services contact

Homelessness

67% ever unhoused

25% spent first night after jail release on the streets

On average, first became unhoused at age 24

Substance use treatment

30% received drug treatment previously

41% believe they could currently benefit from treatment

- One in four (25%) individuals who had been unhoused in the past 12 months said they had stayed in a shelter during that time. Among those who had not used shelters, reasons included restrictions or rules at shelters (29%), safety concerns (21%), and waitlists (21%). Other reasons (38%) included personal preference, pride, having somewhere else to stay, or not knowing how to access shelter services.
- When asked to project their housing situation 12 months ahead, over half (54%) of those who were currently unhoused expected to be in stable housing (e.g., house, apartment, or mobile home), while 37% anticipated still being unhoused.
- Slightly more than one in four (27%) said they had been offered assistance with shelter or housing. Of those 42 adults, over half (57%) accepted the assistance.
- Individuals with a previous arrest were asked where they spent their first night after their most recent release from jail. The second most common response, after their own home (42%), was on the street (25%).

Unreported victimization

- Nearly half (46%) of respondents said they had been the victim of a crime at some point in their lives.
- Of those, a majority (59%) said they did not report at least one of those incidents to law enforcement.
- When asked to describe what type of crime they were a victim of, the most common responses included assault (39%), domestic violence (29%), rape or sexual abuse (20%), and burglary (9%).
- Reasons for not reporting the crime included concerns about risk (21%), fear (17%), negative views of law enforcement (17%), belief that reporting won't help (16%), and knowing the person responsible (14%).

Among justice-involved adults, **lack of trust in institutions** and **fear of retaliation** can deter them from reporting victimization.

Substance use treatment

- About one-third of respondents (30%) reported having received drug treatment at some point in their lives. Among those, 68% said their most recent treatment experience was successful.
- On average, respondents had been admitted to treatment 3.1 times (range: 1 to 20).
- For those who did not complete treatment successfully, the most common reason was a desire to start using again (33%). Others said the program was too strict, too long, or that they were removed from the program.
- When asked about their most recent treatment admission, a majority (56%) said it was voluntary, while 44% said it was court-ordered. There was no significant difference in outcomes between the two groups.
- One in five (20%) respondents said they had tried to access substance use treatment but found it unavailable. Nearly all of these individuals (93%) reported a history of homelessness.
 - The type of treatment they were seeking was most often inpatient care (40%), followed by detox services (28%).

- Over one-fifth (23%) of respondents said they have been offered drug or alcohol treatment as a condition of probation or parole. The most commonly reported was drug court (64%), a specialty court for drug-addicted offenders. Of these 50 adults, a majority (80%) accepted this offer.
- When asked if they thought they could benefit from treatment right now (at the time of interview), 41% responded affirmatively. Among them, the most commonly cited substance they wanted help for was meth (66%), followed by fentanyl (18%) and marijuana (15%).

What are possible ways risky behaviors may indirectly affect the broader community?

Criminal and other risky behaviors of justice-involved adults with substance use issues can affect others in the community. These behaviors may include driving while impaired, sharing syringes, or entering workplaces under the influence.

Risky behaviors related to alcohol and substance use

More than one-third (37%) of interviewed adults reported ever being arrested for driving under the influence (DUI). Among those, 70% said their most recent DUI involved alcohol, 9% drugs, and 21% both.

- Among drug-involved DUIs, they most frequently involved marijuana (38%) and meth (38%). A few also cited heroin (8%), fentanyl (8%), and powder cocaine (8%).
- Nearly half (46%) consumed alcohol at home prior to their most recent DUI incident, while 28% reported drinking at a bar.

In the **12 months** preceding the interview, many respondents reported engaging in behaviors or experiencing consequences that highlight public safety and health concerns:

- **37%** drove under the influence
- **35%** rode with a driver under the influence
- Of those with employment, **28%** went to work under the influence and **22%** missed work due to drinking or using drugs
- **24%** have gone to an emergency room for an alcohol/drug-related issue
- **17%** have injected drugs, and of those, 35% shared needles and/or works
- **13%** had health problems related to their substance use
- **10%** were involved in a domestic violence altercation while under the influence

Overdose and the use of naloxone

About one-fifth (19%) of respondents reported experiencing a drug overdose. Males were nearly twice as likely to report an overdose than females (24% versus 13%, respectively). Notably, most adults that have overdosed (60%) said they had been administered naloxone, a medication designed to rapidly reverse an opioid overdose. A series of questions regarding naloxone revealed the following:

The substances most commonly linked to **overdose** were **fentanyl (44%)**, **meth (21%)**, and **heroin (14%)**.

- Of the 26 individuals who had received naloxone, the average number of administrations was three (range: 1 to 11).
- Naloxone was most commonly administered by friends (42%), followed by fire/EMS personnel (31%), law enforcement (23%), family members (19%), healthcare providers (12%), and service providers (8%).
- Among those who received naloxone from law enforcement, two-thirds (67%) said officers spoke with them about seeking addiction treatment afterward.
- Nearly three in five (58%) said they knew where to obtain naloxone if needed.
- Over one-quarter (27%) of those with a prior overdose said they had administered naloxone to someone else—on average, seven times (range: 1 to 20).

Awareness of Legal Reforms

Legal reforms such as Proposition 47 can directly impact sentencing, eligibility for services, and opportunities for record reduction, yet awareness of these policies remains limited among the incarcerated adult population. In 2024, only 19% of respondents reported having heard of Prop 47, including just 24% of those ever convicted of a felony. Among those aware of it, 24% had petitioned to have a prior offense reduced. Notably, nearly half (45%) of respondents expressed willingness to complete programs like drug treatment even if they were no longer court-mandated due to legislative changes.

In 2025, the study introduced a new question regarding Proposition 36, which modifies elements of Prop 47.¹¹ Data from this addition will be analyzed and reported in 2026, offering further insight into how legal reforms shape engagement with the justice system.

Summary

This bulletin provides an in-depth look at drug use patterns, behaviors, and life circumstances among adults booked into local San Diego County jails. Findings show that marijuana remains the most widely used drug—both in terms of lifetime use and positive test results—followed by meth and cocaine. Despite its recreational legalization, many users continue to rely on street sources for marijuana, highlighting the ongoing prevalence of illicit markets. Prescription drug misuse, particularly involving fentanyl and tranquilizers, also continues to be prevalent, with some individuals identifying it as a gateway to heroin. Additionally, although self-reported fentanyl use decreased for the second consecutive year, it continues to play a major role in self-reported overdose cases.

Beyond drug use, findings reveal strong associations between life risk factors, mental health, and crime. Many respondents reported mental health diagnoses, suicide attempts, and histories of homelessness or time in foster care—experiences that often co-occur with drug use and justice system involvement. Notably, many respondents reported previously accessing substance use treatment while others faced barriers to entry—particularly those with a history of housing instability. Nearly half of respondents expressed interest in treatment at the time of interview. Together, these findings underscore the importance of addressing not only substance use itself, but the broader social and behavioral health factors that drive and sustain it.

¹¹ Quick Guide to Props. (2024). *California Quick Guide to Props.*
<https://quickguidetoprops.sos.ca.gov/propositions/2024-11-05/36>.