

2024 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

May 2025

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Highlights

Nearly all interviewed juveniles have tried at least one illicit substance

Nearly all respondents (98%) reported using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, or methamphetamine at some point in their lives. Of those, three-fourths (76%) used at least one of these substances in the 12 months prior to interview. Consistent with previous years, marijuana and alcohol remained the most commonly reported substances.

Most youth have vaped and prefer it to smoking

Nearly nine in ten youth (85%) reported ever vaping, and a majority said they preferred vaping over smoking cigarettes. Notably, about two in five (43%) said they have gotten sick from vaping and 60% have vaped at school.

A third of youth have misused prescription/over-the-counter drugs

About one-third of youth (34%) reported having ever misused prescription or over-the-counter medications. Among those, half said it was easy or very easy to obtain prescription drugs without a prescription. The most commonly misused substances were Percocet and tranquilizers.

Half of youth have justice-involved parents or guardians

Justice system involvement often extended across generations: about half of respondents (51%) reported that a parent or guardian had been arrested and booked before, and 40% said a sibling had experienced the same.

One in five experienced suicidal thoughts, with a greater prevalence among females

Mental health concerns were prevalent among youth, with 59% reporting they had seen a counselor or mental health professional. Additionally, one in five (20%) had experienced thoughts of suicide, and rates were notably higher among females, with 46% of female youth reporting suicidal thoughts compared to 10% of males.

Background

Following the discontinuation of the federally funded Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program in 2004, local funding enabled the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to continue this critical data collection effort through the San Diego County Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) program (formerly known as Substance Abuse Monitoring). In 2024, the SUM program was supported by the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA), the Health and Human Services Agency (HHSA), the San Diego Youth Transition Campus, 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 - 2024 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region - is the first in a four-part series presenting SUM data collected during the 2024 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.

A total of 41 youth participated in the study, including 15 from the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility, 7 from the Youth Transition Center (YTC), and 19 from the San Diego Achievement Centers.² While urinalysis testing has historically been a component of this research, collection was limited during the 2024 interview cycle due to COVID-19 protocols and intake procedures at East Mesa. As a result, urine samples were only collected from the 7 participants at the YTC.³

What information is collected through these interviews?

- Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 4)
- Patterns of substance use (page 4)
- Vaping trends (page 7)
- 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 12)
- Risk factors related to home environment, mental health, and school attendance (page 13)
- Criminal and other risky behavior (page 14)
- Summary (page 16)

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.

² The inclusion of Achievement Center youth is intended to supplement the sample due to limited accessibility of these individuals. While Achievement Centers provide programming for both probation and at-risk youth from the community, for the purpose of this study, only youth under probation supervision were interviewed.

³ The collection of urine samples resumed in the Fall of 2024 at the newly opened Youth Transition Center (previously San Diego County Juvenile Hall). Caution should be taken when comparing this year's sample to previous years, as youth responses were historically only included if they provided a urine sample.

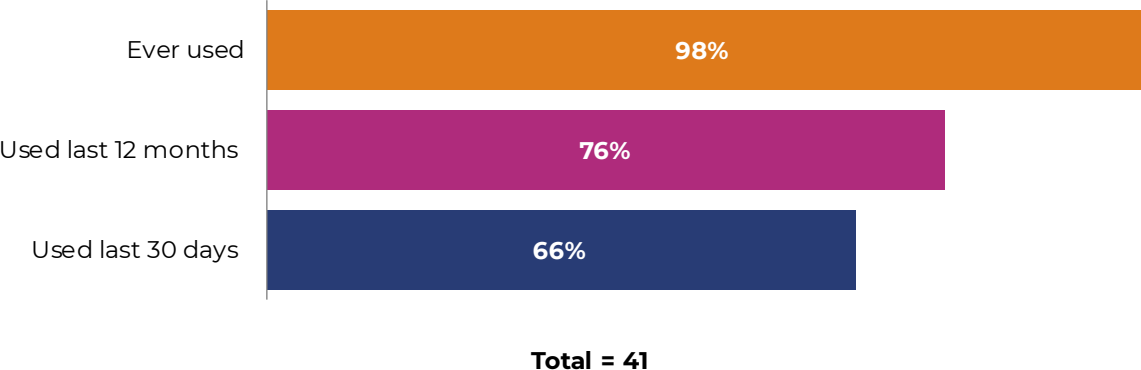
How many youth with justice system contact have ever tried illicit substances?

Interview data from 2024 highlight the high prevalence of substance use among youth with justice system contact, with the majority reporting not only lifetime use, but also recent use of illicit substances. Nearly all respondents (98%) reported ever using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, or methamphetamine (meth). Of those, 76% reported using at least one of these substances in the past 12 months, and of those, 66% reported using within the past 30 days (Figure 1). The average number of substances ever tried was 2.8 (SD = 1.36), with a range of zero to six.

What were the characteristics of the youth interviewed?

Of the 41 interviewed youth, 30 (73%) were male and 11 (27%) were female. A majority of interviewed youth were Hispanic/Latino(a) (53%), followed by Black/African American (24%), and White (21%). The average age of interviewed youth was 15.7, and most youth reported being enrolled in school (76%) at the time of the interview.

Figure 1: Self-Reported Substance Use History by Timeframe



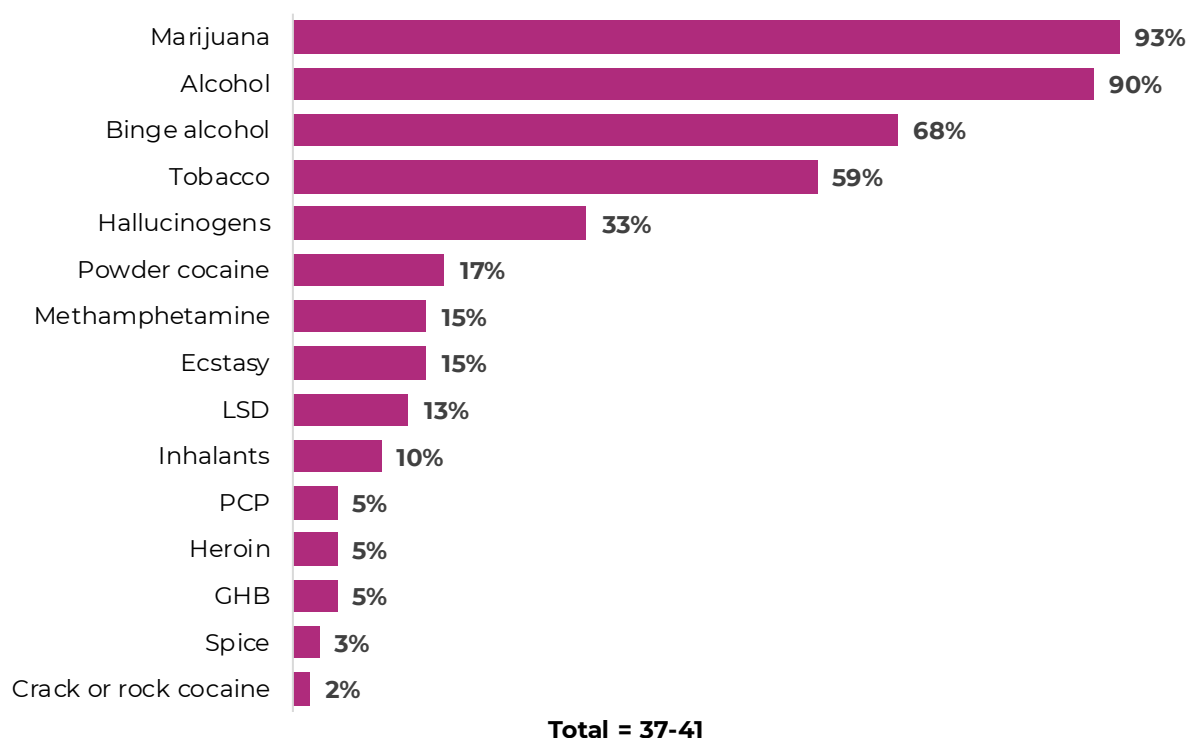
Source: SANDAG, 2024

What were the patterns of substance use among interviewed youth?

Consistent with previous years, marijuana (93%) and alcohol (90%) were the most commonly used substances among those interviewed, followed by tobacco (59%) (Figure 2). Tobacco use has steadily declined over time among juvenile respondents, and the 2024 figure represents one of the lowest rates since 2008, when about three in four (74%) reported ever trying it.

In regard to alcohol consumption, over two-thirds (68%) of respondents reported binge drinking—defined as consuming five or more drinks on one occasion for males, or four for females. In addition, one in three youth (33%) had experimented with hallucinogens, and nearly one in five (17%) reported ever using powder cocaine.

Figure 2: Rates of Substance Use Among Interviewed Youth

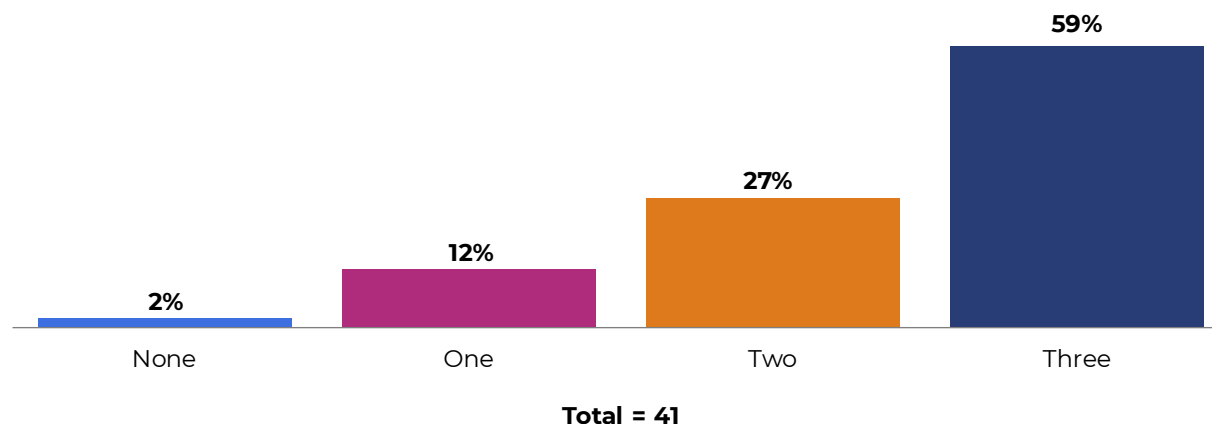


Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

The three substances considered “gateways” to further substance use for youth include alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco. It is commonly believed that the use of these substances may increase the likelihood of experimenting with more potent substances.⁴ In 2024, only one individual (2%) reported never having tried any of these three gateway drugs, but nearly three in five (59%) reported having tried all three—a proportion consistent with previous years.

Figure 3: Number of Gateway Drugs Used Among Interviewed Youth

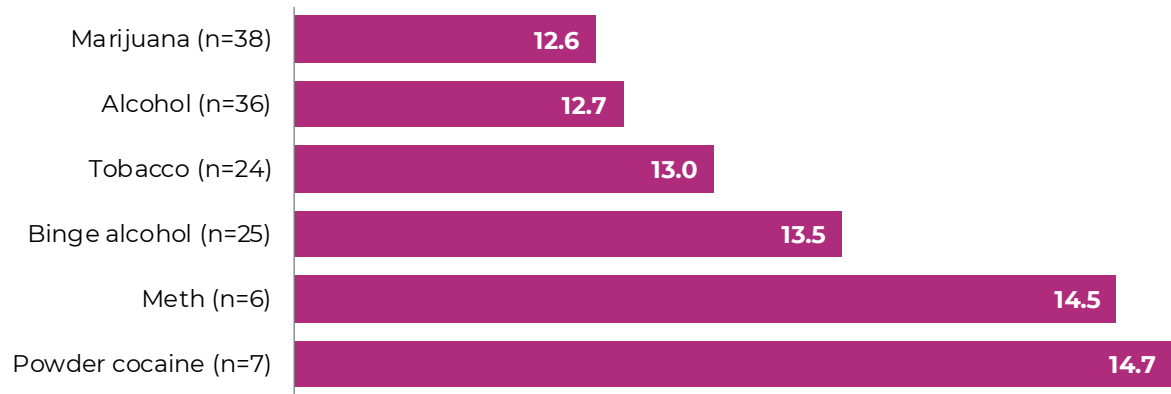


Source: SANDAG, 2024

⁴ DuPont, R. L., Han, B., Shea, C. L., & Madras, B. K. (2018). “Drug use among youth: National survey data support a common liability of all drug use.” *Preventive Medicine*, 113, 68–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.05.015>

For many of these youth, substance experimentation began at an early age, with alcohol and marijuana use starting first—both before the age of 13 (Figure 4). Tobacco and binge drinking alcohol follow closely behind, with an average initiation age of 13.0 and 13.5, respectively. Methamphetamine and powder cocaine appear slightly later, but before the age of 15.

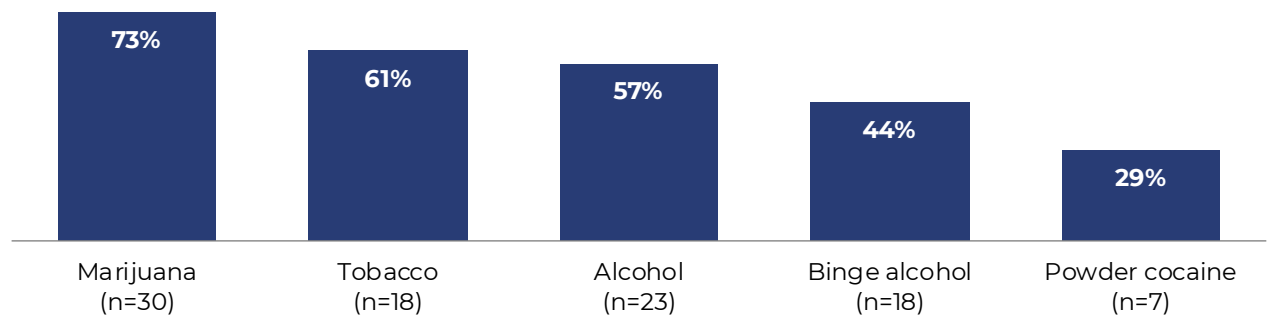
Figure 4: Average Age of Initial Substance Use



Note: Cases with missing information and/or a respondent size less than three are excluded from the figure.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

Youth who reported using a substance in the past year (in the 12 months prior to interview) were asked about their use of each substance in the past 30 days. Marijuana had the highest rate of recent use, with nearly three in four (73%) reporting use within the past 30 days (Figure 5). This was followed by tobacco (61%) and alcohol (57%). Additionally, two of seven (29%) youth reported recent use of powder cocaine.

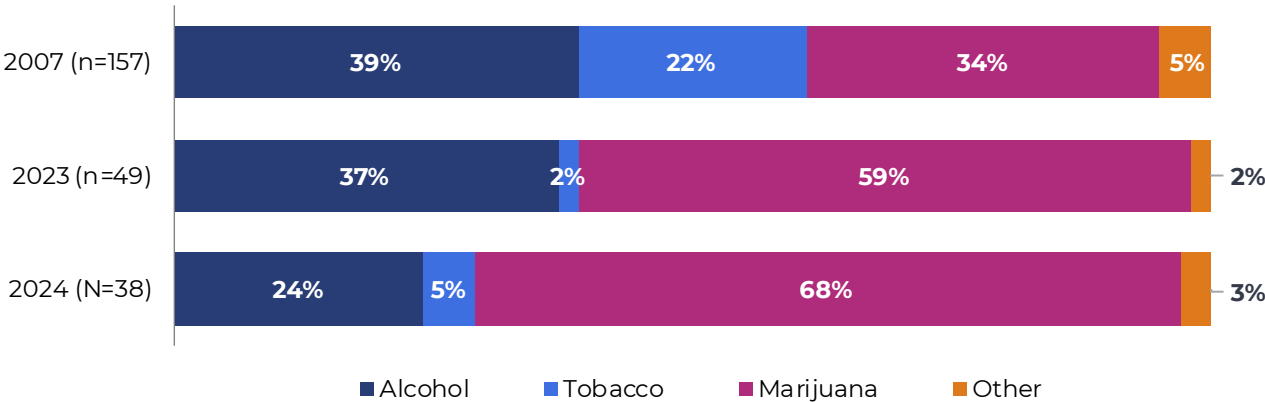
Figure 5: Percentage of Respondents Reporting Use of Each Substance in the Past 30 Days



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

When the question was first asked in 2007, slightly more youth reported alcohol as the first substance they had ever tried (39%) compared to marijuana (34%) (Figure 6). However, this trend has shifted over time, with marijuana increasingly becoming the first substance experimented with. By 2024, a majority of youth (68%) reported marijuana as their first substance, while only 24% cited alcohol—down from 37% in 2023. Tobacco remains the least popular choice, with just 5% of youth reporting it as their first drug.

Figure 6: First Substance Ever Tried Among Interviewed Youth

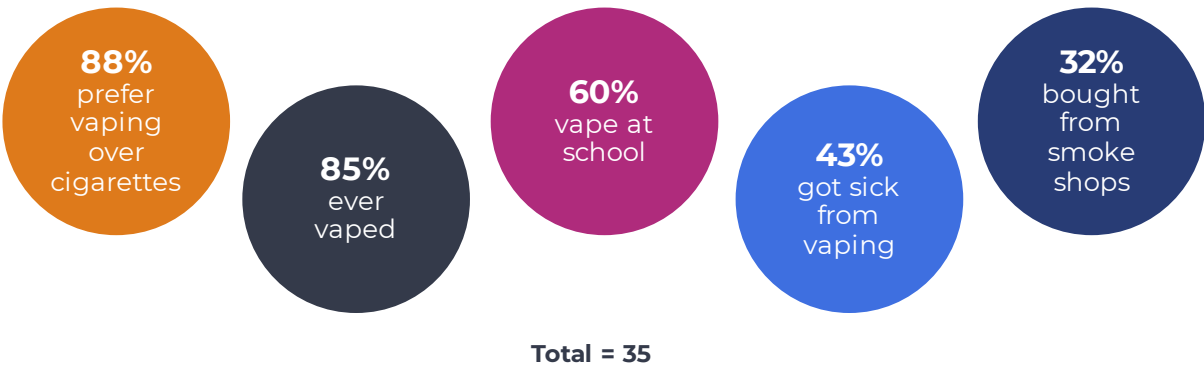


*Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024*

Although tobacco use has declined in recent years, interview data from recent years suggests that vaping is replacing traditional tobacco products among youth. Many described vaping as being more accessible, socially acceptable, or less harmful (Figure 7).

- In 2024, nearly nine in ten (85%) reported they had ever vaped. Of those, four-fifths (80%) said they had vaped in the past 30 days, averaging about 12 days of use per month.
- Six in ten (60%) reported vaping at school—highlighting both ease of access and normalization among peers.
- About two in five (43%) said they have gotten sick from vaping.
- When asked about their preferences, the vast majority (88%) said they preferred vaping over smoking cigarettes. For some, this preference may stem from the perception of reduced risk: more than one-third (38%) believed that vaping is less harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- Flavored nicotine products were particularly common, cited by 94% of youth who vaped. Marijuana/THC was also frequently used in vapes (74%), while non-flavored nicotine made up a smaller share (17%).
- In terms of how youth obtain vapes, most reported getting them from friends or acquaintances (58%), and about one in three (32%) purchased them directly from smoke shops.

Figure 7: Vaping Trends and Preferences Among Interviewed Youth

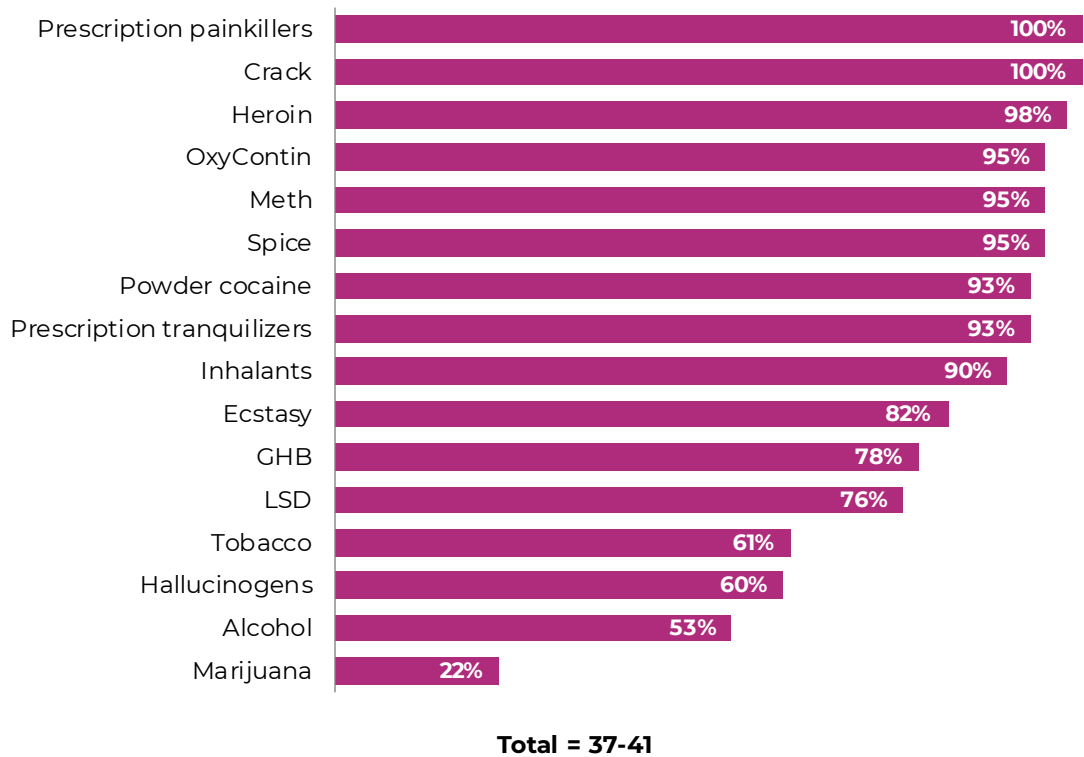


Source: SANDAG, 2024

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), more than half of youth perceived nearly all of the listed substances as being “**EXTREMELY BAD**” or “**VERY BAD,**” with the exception of marijuana which was only seen as bad by about one in five (22%) (Figure 8). On the contrary, there was a strong consensus regarding the perceived dangers of prescription painkillers (when taken without a prescription)⁵ and crack cocaine, with all youth unanimously perceiving those as highly harmful, followed by heroin (98%). Notably, the proportion of youth who described marijuana as harmful has increased in recent years—from 7% in 2022 to 15% in 2023 and 22% in 2024.

Figure 8: Percentage of Youth Who View Each Drug as 'Extremely' or 'Very Bad'

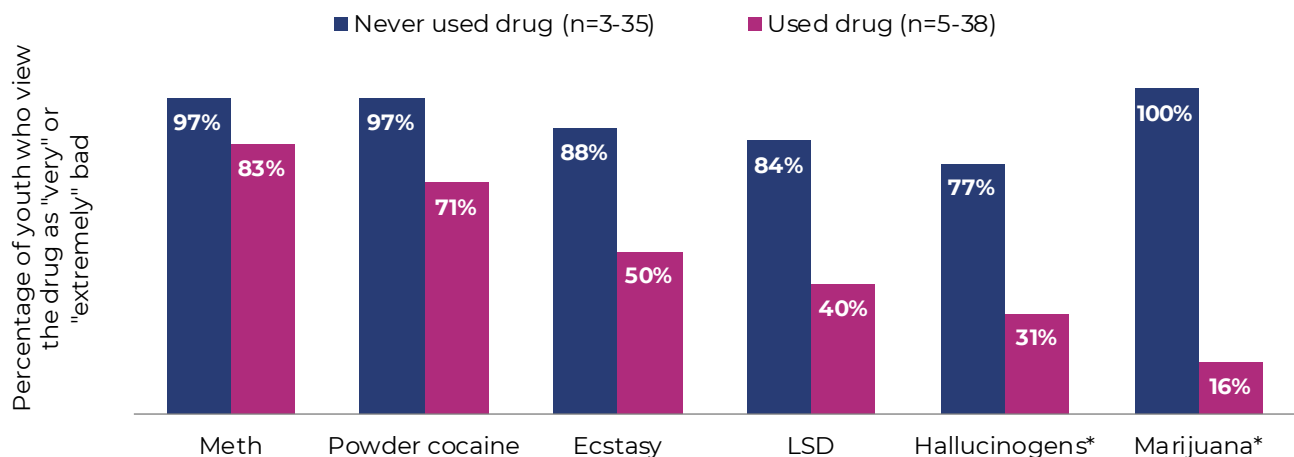


Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

For some drugs, perception of harm differed significantly depending on whether a youth had previous experience with it. That is, those who had tried the respective drug were less likely to perceive it as very harmful compared to those who had not. As shown in Figure 9, this difference in harm perception was particularly notable for marijuana, hallucinogens, LSD, and ecstasy. Marijuana had the largest gap, with only 16% of those who had used it perceiving it as harmful, compared to 100% of those who had never used it. While the gap was smaller for substances like meth and powder cocaine, differences in perception based on prior use were still evident.

⁵ Prescription painkillers include Codeine, Methadone, Dilaudid, Percocet, Vicodin, Fentanyl, and morphine.

Figure 9: Relationship Between Previous Substance Use and Perceived Harmfulness



* Significant at $p < 0.05$
Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

Among youth who reported substance use in the past year, most (a combined 86%) described alcohol as **"VERY EASY"** or **"EASY"** to obtain (Figure 10). Marijuana and tobacco were also reported to be highly accessible, with 79% and 78% of these youth, respectively, indicating easy access. Notably, powder cocaine was reported as easily accessible by 71%, highlighting the widespread availability of both legal and illegal substances within this group.⁶

Figure 10: Percentage of Youth That Reported Easy Access to Substances



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

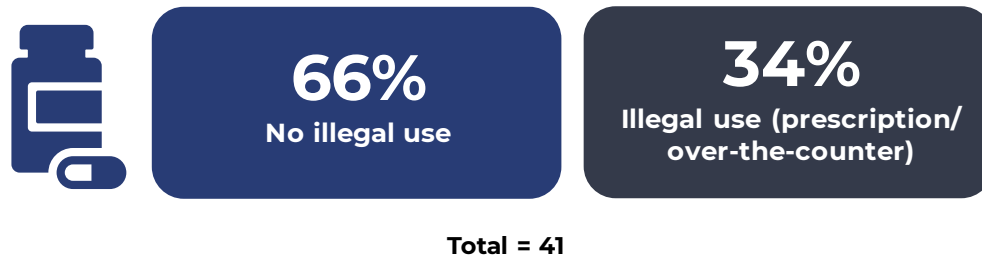
Among youth who reported ever consuming alcohol, the most commonly reported method of obtaining it was receiving it from someone aged 21 or older (24%). Other frequent methods included purchasing it from a store (21%), receiving it from someone under 21 (17%), taking it from a store (14%), and taking it from someone else's home (10%).

⁶ It is important to note that only seven youth provided their perception on the ease of obtaining powder cocaine. Due to this small sample size, it is advised to use caution when interpreting these results.

How many youth used prescription drugs illegally?

Misusing prescription or over-the-counter drugs refers to using them without a valid prescription or taking them in a manner or for purposes other than as prescribed, such as using a higher dose or using them for recreational purposes. In 2024, more than one-third of youth (34%) reported ever misusing prescription and/or over-the-counter medications (Figure 11), a decrease from 52% reported in 2023. While this change may be influenced by the smaller sample size in 2024, it suggests a need to closely monitor future trends in prescription drug misuse.

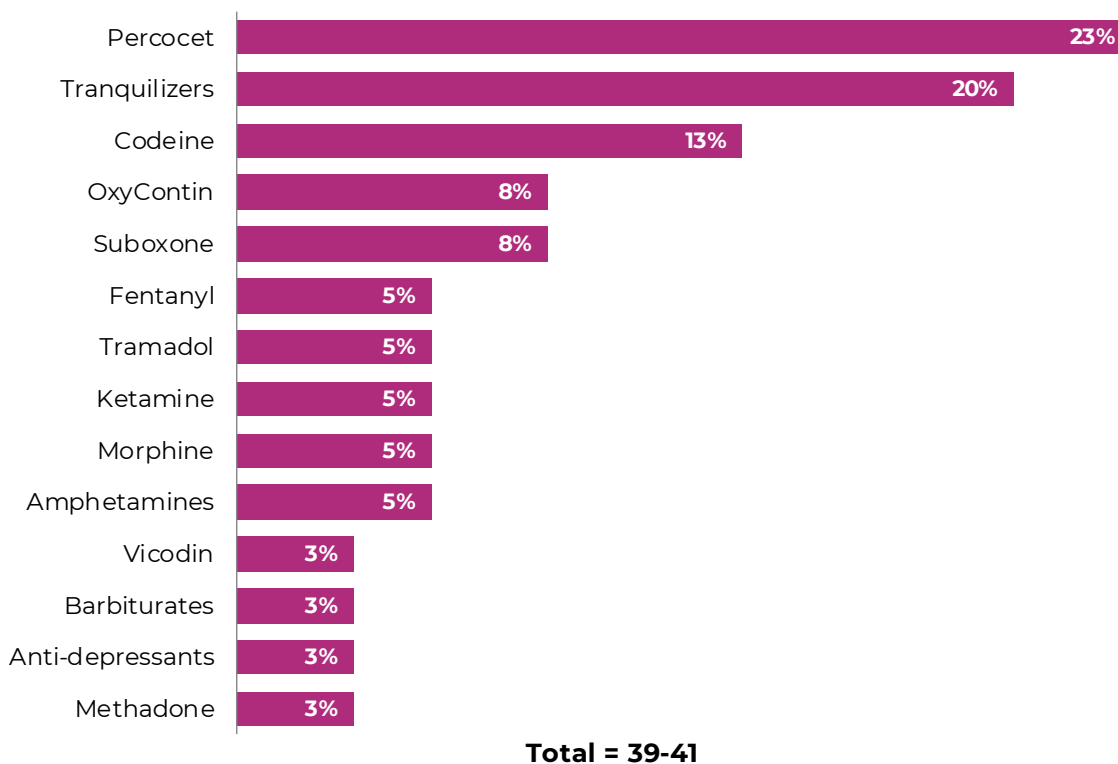
Figure 11: Illegal Prescription or Over-the-Counter Drug Use Among Interviewed Youth



Source: SANDAG, 2024

The most commonly misused prescription drugs among interviewed youth were Percocet (23%) and tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rohypnol, Roach) at 20% (Figure 12). Other painkillers, like Codeine (13%) and OxyContin (8%), were also reported. A small number of youth reported using fentanyl, morphine, and amphetamines (2 individuals each), while a few others mentioned Vicodin, barbiturates, anti-depressants, and methadone (one each).

Figure 12: Frequency of Prescription Drug Misuse Among Interviewed Youth

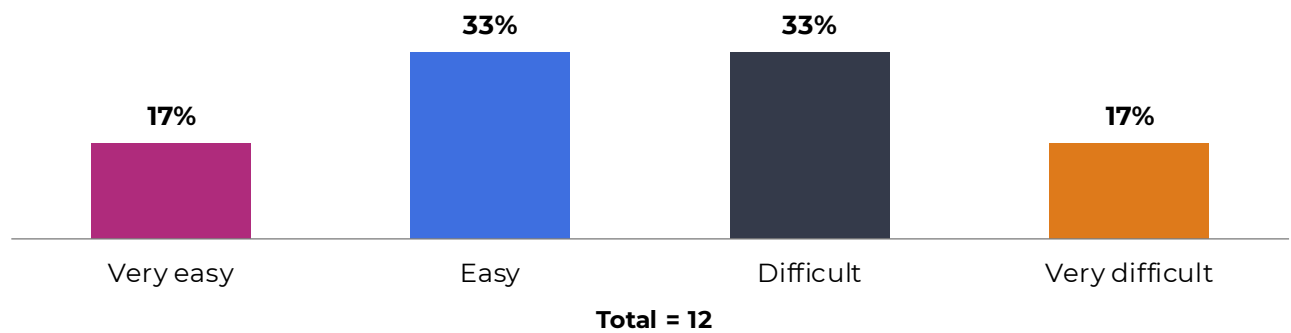


Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

A large portion of youth believe prescription drugs are easily accessible. Among those who reported illegally using prescription drugs, 50% felt that getting these drugs without a prescription is **"VERY EASY"** (17%) or **"EASY"** (33%). On the other hand, the remaining 50% reported that it is **"DIFFICULT"** (33%) or **"VERY DIFFICULT"** (17%) to obtain them, revealing a clear split in how accessible these drugs are perceived.

Figure 13: Perceived Ease of Obtaining Prescription Drugs Illegally

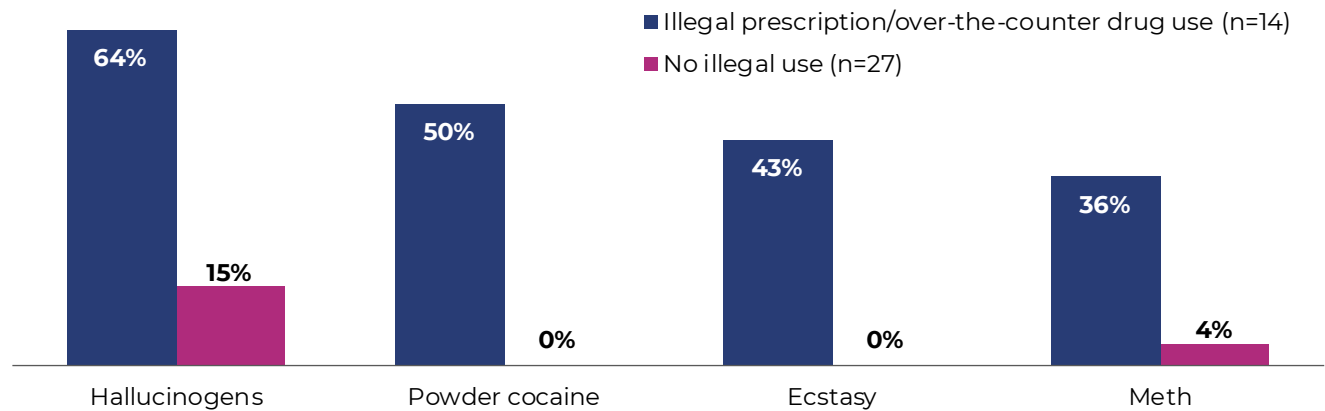


Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2024

When asked how they obtained prescription drugs, the most common response was that another person gave it to them (58%), with the other person most often being a friend (83%) or someone they did not know (50%). Additionally, three-fourths (75%) said they bought it and half (50%) took it from someone else. Prescription drugs were most often taken from an acquaintance (66%), friends (50%), or a family member (33%).

Youth who reported misusing prescription and/or over-the-counter drugs were more likely to use other illicit substances. For those who reported misusing prescription medications, the use of drugs like hallucinogens, powder cocaine, ecstasy, and meth was far more common compared to their peers who did not misuse prescriptions. Specifically, about half of those who reported misuse had also tried powder cocaine and ecstasy. In contrast, youth who did not misuse prescription drugs did not report using these substances (Figure 13).

Figure 14: 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, 2024

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

Prior experience with drug treatment

Of all interviewed youth, eight (20%) reported prior experience with drug treatment, with an average of 1.6 number of treatments. For many, the decision to enter treatment was influenced by external factors: half of them had court-ordered treatment, while the other half either chose treatment on their own or were encouraged by their parents. Of the seven youth who reported their most recent treatment experience, four said they successfully completed the program. The remaining three did not finish, citing reasons such as the program being too long, being kicked out, wanting to resume drug use, or still being enrolled in treatment.

Regarding the types of treatment, four youth attended inpatient programs, while three participated in outpatient care. The substances they were treated for included marijuana (seven youth), alcohol (seven youth), cocaine/crack (two youth), methamphetamine (two youth), and heroin (one youth).

Current need or desire for drug treatment

In addition to asking about prior treatment experiences, all youth interviewed who reported trying an illicit substance were also asked if they believed they currently needed or wanted treatment for any drug they had ever used. Despite the high prevalence of substance use (98%), only three youth expressed interest in seeking treatment, mentioning marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco.

Figure 15: Engagement and Interest in Substance Treatment



Source: SANDAG, 2024

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

Home environment

- In the year leading up to the interview, most youth (83%) were living in stable housing, such as a house, apartment, or mobile home. Another 10% lived in group settings, including shelters, treatment facilities, or group homes. Two youth (5%) reported being unhoused for most of the year.
- Living with both parents was uncommon among the youth interviewed. Among those who lived in a stable residence, most lived with their mother (76%), while less than half (45%) lived with their father. Only one-third (33%) lived with both parents, and 12% reported not living with a parent at all.
- Around one-third (34%) said their immediate family had some type of prior involvement with CWS. Proportionally, female youth were nearly twice as likely as male youth to have experienced familial CWS involvement (50% and 29%, respectively).
- Over one-fourth of the youth (27%) had spent time in foster care.
- Nearly one in three (32%) said their parents had struggled with alcohol abuse, while nearly one in four (23%) disclosed parental use of illegal drugs other than marijuana—most often methamphetamine or heroin.
- Running away from home was a common experience, with 51% saying they had done so at least once. Personal mood (60%) and family conflict (25%) were the most common reasons, though 20% said they ran away to escape abuse.
- Justice system involvement often extended across generations: about half (51%) of youth said a parent or guardian had been arrested and booked, and 40% reported that a sibling had also been booked.

Mental health

- One in five (20%) youth reported ever having suicidal thoughts and 15% (6 youth) reported a suicide attempt. Nearly half of all females interviewed reported suicidal thoughts (46%) compared to 10% of male youth.
- About three in five (59%) said they had seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavioral, or mental health issues. The data revealed a stark gender difference: 10 out of 11 (91%) females reported having seen a professional, compared to about half (47%) of 30 male youth.
- Almost one in three (32%) reported feeling like their mental, emotional, or psychological health has gotten in the way of doing daily activities or accomplishing their goals.
- Over one-fifth (22%) have a mental, emotional, or psychological issue diagnosis.

Home environment

51%

ran away from home

51%

parental criminal history

34%

previous CWS contact

32%

parental alcohol abuse

27%

foster care involvement

Mental health

20%

have thought about suicide

15%

have made a previous
suicide attempt

School

80%

history of truancy

24%

not enrolled at time of
interview

22%

have brought a weapon to
school

School work

- At the time of the interview, ten youth (24%) were not enrolled in school as a result of dropping out (4 youth), being expelled (2), suspended (1), or for some other reason (1). Two individuals had already graduated or received their GED.
- A majority of youth (80%) reported skipping school at some point, with 23% having been referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB). In the four weeks prior to the interview, youth missed an average of 2.7 school days.
- Nine youth (22%) reported ever bringing a weapon to school.
 - The most common weapons were knives or switchblades (8 youth), followed by guns (3) and brass knuckles (2).
 - Reasons for carrying weapons included self-protection (4 youth), retaliation (2), status symbol (2), and forgetting it was in their possession (2).

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

Previous criminal justice involvement

Nearly three-fifths (59%) of the youth reported having been arrested or booked at least once before their most current arrest, with an average of 2.6 prior arrests (ranging from 1 to 9). Of those, a majority (92%) had served time.

- An even larger portion—71%—had been on probation before, and the vast majority of those youth (97%) were still under probation supervision at the time of the interview.
- Among youth with prior arrests, about three-fifths (63%) said they had participated in a diversion or alternative sanction program. These included the San Diego County Achievement Centers (67%) and, in a few individual cases, ATD, HOPE, McAllister inpatient/outpatient, or community service (each representing one youth, or 8% of that subgroup).
- When asked about their first arrest, nearly half of the youth (46%) said it was for a property crime, while 42% reported a violent crime. Fewer youth mentioned weapons (17%) or a status offense (13%).⁷
- Most youth (76%) were aware of curfew laws in San Diego County, and more than two-fifths (44%) said they had been stopped by police for being out past curfew.

Gang affiliation

Nearly half (49%) of youth interviewed said they were in a gang or had hung out with gang members at some point, with a majority (95%) having done so within the last five years. On average, they first got involved around the age of 12.5 (range 6 to 16).

- Of these 20 youth, seven (35%) currently identify as gang members, while five (25%) associate with gang members but do not identify as one. Six (30%) used to associate but no longer do, and two (10%) officially left their gangs.

Justice system related behaviors

59%

have been previously arrested

63%

have participated in a diversion or alternative sanction program

General risky behaviors

50%

rode in a car with a driver who was under the influence

49%

in a gang or associated with one

25%

have been involved in drug distribution

18%

have committed a crime to get money for drugs

15%

have overdosed

⁷ A status offense is a noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth's status as a minor.

- Among the youth who no longer associate with gangs, the reasons for leaving include growing tired of the lifestyle, wanting to avoid or escape the criminal justice system, family interventions, and concerns over safety.

High-risk behaviors and adverse outcomes related to substance use

- Nearly one-fifth (18%) of interviewed youth reported they had previously committed a crime to get money to buy drugs.
- One in four youth (25%) said they had some previous involvement in drug distribution – either selling drugs, serving as a middleman, or both. The most common drugs distributed included marijuana (100%), powder cocaine (44%), meth (44%), rock cocaine (33%), and heroin (33%). Other drugs sold included prescription painkillers, OxyContin, hallucinogens, and ecstasy.
- Four of ten (40%) youth with prior involvement in drug distribution said they had been involved in the past 30 days specifically.
- Six youth (15%) reported experiencing a drug overdose involving either powder cocaine, heroin, or marijuana.
 - Of these, two reported requiring naloxone, a medication used to reverse or reduce the effects of opioids. One reported having it administered once, and the other reported 16 times (likely across different instances). Fire or emergency services were involved in at least one case.
 - When asked whether they would know where or how to obtain naloxone in the future, only four of the six youth who had overdosed responded to the question; of those, three said they would know how to obtain it in San Diego County if needed.

Youth were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences with risky behaviors related to substance use in the past 12 months. Table 1 below describes these experiences in further detail.

Table 1: Percentage of Respondents That Have Experienced High-Risk Behaviors Due to Substance Use

High-Risk Behaviors Linked to Substance Use	Percentage
Got sick or experienced a hangover as a result of drinking or using drugs	50%
Rode in a car with a driver who was under the influence	50%
Got in trouble with their parents for drinking or using drugs	41%
Got in a physical fight while or after drinking or using drugs	40%
Unable to remember what happened after drinking or using drugs	38%
Felt regret about something they did while drunk or high	31%
Passed out while drinking or using drugs	30%
Went to school under the influence	30%
Missed school because of drinking or using drugs	28%
Participated in sexual acts while or after drinking or using drugs	28%
Drove a car during or after drinking or using drugs	25%
Had health problems related to alcohol and/or drug use	18%
TOTAL	39-40

Note: Cases with missing information not included.

Source: SANDAG, 2024

Additional behavioral risks

Beyond substance use, youth also reported high-risk experiences involving sexual exploitation, firearm access, and drug trafficking.

- Among the 11 youth who reported engaging in sexual activity while under the influence, four (36%) said they never used condoms, and another four (36%) said they only used them occasionally.
- Three female participants reported being approached to be pimped or prostituted, with an average age of 16.5 at the time of the first solicitation. These encounters occurred in familiar public settings such as schools, malls, parks, and parties.
- Two youth (one male, one female) disclosed exchanging sex for money, drugs, or other goods, and one youth reported involvement in pimping or pandering activities.
- Firearm access was also common: one in three respondents (33%) reported having carried a gun. Most said they had obtained it from a friend (67%) or purchased it off the street (33%). When asked how easy it was to get a gun, a combined nine youth (69%) said it was **“EASY”** or **“VERY EASY.”**
- In addition, two youth said they had been approached to transport or conceal drugs across the U.S.–Mexico border, and one male disclosed smuggling drugs into the U.S.

Summary

This CJ Bulletin presents data on substance use among juvenile arrestees in the San Diego region, revealing patterns of early and frequent substance use. In 2024, nearly all interviewed youth reported ever using substances such as alcohol, marijuana, or harder drugs at some point in their lives. For many, substance use began before the age of 13 for alcohol and marijuana, and before the age of 15 for harder drugs such as meth and powder cocaine. Youth’s perceptions of drug-related harm varied widely. While substances such as prescription painkillers and crack cocaine were seen as highly dangerous by all respondents, marijuana and hallucinogens were generally viewed as less harmful—especially by those who had used them. Misuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications was also common and closely linked to the use of other illicit substances.

Interview data suggests these patterns often occur alongside broader life challenges, including unstable home environments, parental histories of substance use and justice system involvement, mental health struggles, and involvement in gangs or drug distribution. Together, these findings underscore the interconnected factors shaping substance use and other high-risk behaviors among justice-involved youth.