



SUBSTANCE USE AND OTHER RISK FACTORS OF YOUTH BOOKED IN 2020

As part of the SANDAG Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program, adults and youth are interviewed in local detention facilities within 48 hours of being booked. In addition to answering confidential and anonymous questions regarding their drug use history and other risk factors, a voluntary urine sample that cannot be tied back to any particular individual is also requested which enables the compilation of regional drug use trends over time. With the release of data from the youth interviews that were conducted in 2020,¹ this CJ Flash highlights some of the key findings from this most recent report.

Highlight 1

Three in five (60%) of the youth interviewed in 2020 tested positive for at least one drug,² with marijuana being the drug of choice (56% positive). As Table 1 shows, more youth had tried alcohol, compared to marijuana, but more youth reported marijuana was the first drug they had ever tried. Additionally, the average age of first use for marijuana was lower, a greater percentage had used it in the past 30 days, and of those who had used it in the past month, the frequency of use was greater. Youth were also more likely to report that marijuana was “very easy” or “easy” to obtain and to perceive less harm associated with its use.

Table 1

Self-Reported Use and Youth Perception of Alcohol and Marijuana, 2020

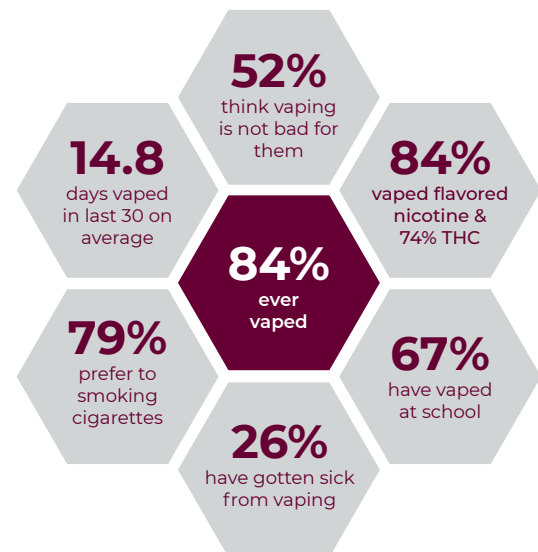
	Alcohol	Marijuana
Ever tried	94%	88%
First substance ever used	38%	46%
Average age first use	12.0	11.6
Used in past 30 days (if ever used)	64%	80%
Average number of days used in past 30 (if used)	8.1	18.6
Perceive as “very easy” or “easy” to obtain	74%	100%
Perceive as “extremely” or “very” bad for users	36%	20%

Highlight 2

Vaping, or e-cigarettes, involve a liquid being heated into an aerosol that the user can inhale. Vaping has increased dramatically over the past five years and as the U.S. Surgeon General has noted,³ youth today are more likely to vape than adults and vape than smoke cigarettes. In 2020, 84% of the youth interviewed said they had ever vaped, most often flavored nicotine, but also THC. Over three-quarters (79%) said they prefer vaping to smoking cigarettes, two-thirds (67%) said they had vaped at school, around one-quarter (26%) said they had gotten sick from vaping, and just over half (52%) said vaping was “not at all” or “only a little bit” bad for them. On average, the youth who had vaped said they did so about every other day (mean of 14.8 days in the past 30).

Figure 1

Self-Reported Vaping History and Youth Perception of Vaping, 2020



¹ The first half of the SAM interviews in 2020 were conducted prior to the stay-home order and the second half were able to be conducted virtually to ensure the safety of the youth and project staff. It should also be noted that this methodological change, as well as new policies that promoted alternatives to detention that limited who could be booked into Juvenile Hall should be considered when reviewing these results and how they may be different from prior years. A total of 50 youth was interviewed and provided a urine sample for testing in 2020.
² The drugs tested for included marijuana, opiates, cocaine/crack, methamphetamine, and PCP.
³ For more information about vaping and the risks of e-cigarettes, visit <https://e-cigarettes.surgeongeneral.gov/>.

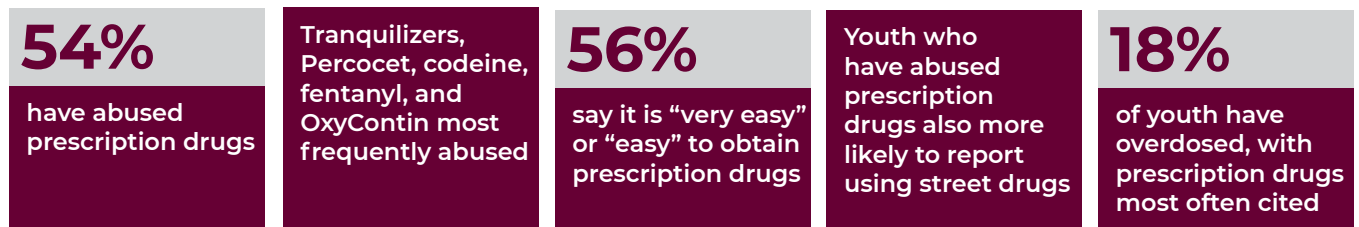


Highlight 3

As Figure 3 shows, just over half (54%) of the youth interviewed reported ever abusing prescription drugs. Of these 27 youth who said they had, the most commonly abused prescription drugs included tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rophypnol/Roachas), followed by Percocet, codeine, fentanyl, and OxyContin. Fifty-six percent (56%) said it was “very easy” or “easy” to obtain the drugs and those who reported abusing prescription drugs were also significantly more likely to report using street drugs. In addition, almost one in five (18%) said they had ever overdosed on a drug (up from 9% in 2019), with prescription drugs most often cited for the overdose. Five of the nine youth who had ever overdosed also said they had been given naloxone.

Figure 3

Self-Reported Prescription Drug Abuse History by Youth, 2020



Highlight 4

With fewer youth being detained, it is important to understand from a prevention and intervention point of view the underlying risk factors that these youth have. A review of the risks reported by interviewed youth included a family history of justice system involvement and contact with the Child Welfare System (CWS), running away from home, and foster care placement. Many of the youth also shared a history of truancy and mental health issues, including suicidal thoughts.

Figure 4

Self-Reported Youth Risk Factors, 2020



Information from the SAM project, while not reflective of the general population, provides valuable information on current and past risky behaviors of some of our most vulnerable youth. San Diego County’s juvenile justice stakeholders are committed to transforming the entire system to align with the best practices in the field, which emphasizes avoiding detention of youth when safe for the public and the youth. In support of these changes, these results offer important information to raise the awareness of the challenges this population is grappling with in order to help target appropriate interventions.