

Mental Health Issues Among San Diego County Arrestees

According to data gathered through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Survey on Drug Use and Health, in 2021 23% of adults in the United States reported experiencing Any Mental Illness.¹ To increase awareness of the importance and impact mental health has on one’s well-being, the month of May is nationally recognized as Mental Health Awareness Month. To bring light to some of the mental health struggles in the justice involved population in the San Diego region, this CJ flash highlights key statistics related to mental health issues arrestees reported as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program in 2022.²

Highlight 1

Two in five (40%) arrestees interviewed as part of the SAM program reported ever being diagnosed with a mental or psychiatric disorder. When examining diagnosis rates across various characteristics, significant differences were seen based on gender and housing status, with female arrestees and homeless individuals more likely to report a diagnosis compared to their counterparts. Other significant differences in demographics are denoted with an asterisk in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Characteristics of arrestees with a mental health diagnosis



¹ According to SAMHSA, Any Mental Illness (AMI) is defined as having a diagnosable mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder, other than a developmental or substance use disorder. Any mental illness includes persons who have mild, moderate, and serious mental illness. For additional details on key findings from the SAMHSA survey, the full report can be accessed here: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt39443/2021NSDUHFFRRev010323.pdf>.

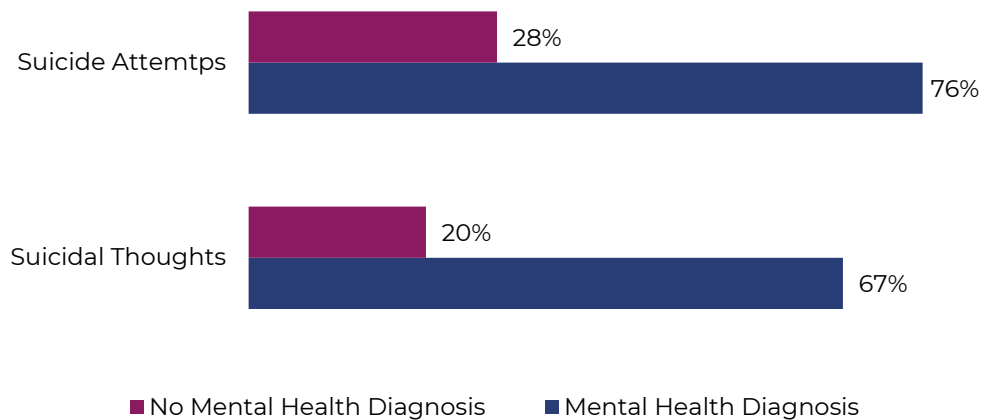
² The Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program is an interview effort conducted annually by SANDAG’s Criminal Justice Research Division. As part of this initiative, arrestees are approached within 48 hours of being booked into jail. If the arrestee is willing to participate in a confidential interview, they are asked a series of questions related to their drug use history, mental health history, and socioeconomic status. Participants also provide an anonymous urine sample for drug testing.

Highlight 2

In addition to differences in demographics, there were also notable disparities in suicide-related behaviors between individuals with a mental health diagnosis and those without. Individuals with a mental health diagnosis were significantly more likely to have had suicidal thoughts or ideation compared to those without a diagnosis (67% and 20%, respectively). Similarly, the prevalence of suicide attempts was higher among those with a diagnosis (76% versus 28% for those without). These statistics emphasize the urgent need for targeted mental health support to address the increased risk of suicide in this population.

Figure 2

Arrestees with mental health diagnoses significantly more likely to report suicidal behavior



Highlight 3

Three-fourths (75%) of individuals who reported mental illness also reported ever staying overnight for mental health treatment at a psychiatric unit or another facility. Of those who were admitted for mental health treatment, 48% reported being under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol at the time of their admission, emphasizing the importance of addressing co-occurring issues.



If you or someone you know is facing a mental health crisis, you are not alone. Get help by contacting San Diego County's Access and Crisis Line (888-724-7240), the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (988), or 2-1-1. Online resources and chat lines are also available at <https://988lifeline.org/chat/> and www.up2sd.org/.

