

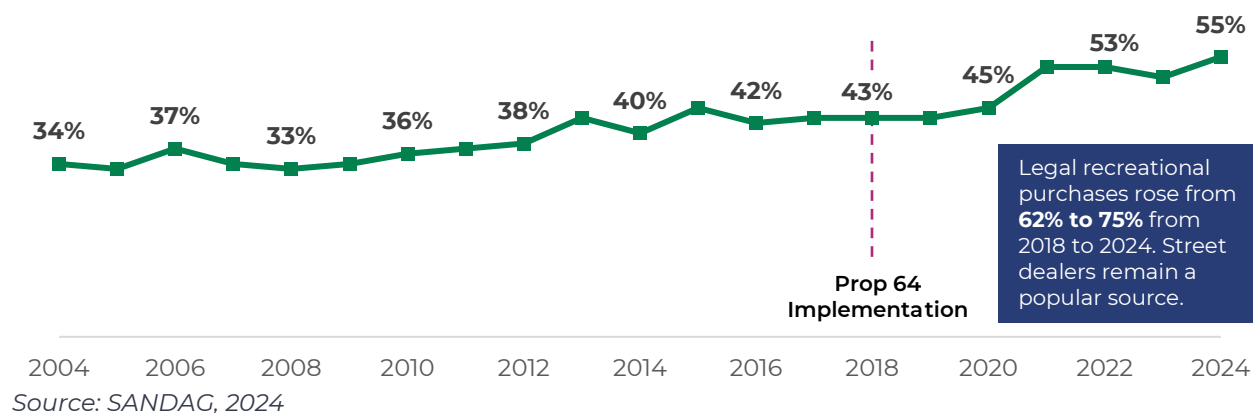
## Two Decades of Drug Use Trends Among Adult Arrestees (2004-2024)

To better understand the backgrounds, experiences, and drug use patterns of justice-involved individuals, the Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) program conducts confidential interviews and voluntary drug tests with people recently booked into San Diego County jails. After federal funding for a similar national program ended in 2004, San Diego launched its own locally supported effort—marking the start of the SUM program as it exists today. This CJ Flash presents findings from 2004 to 2024, capturing two decades of substance use trends among adult respondents.<sup>1</sup> Results reveal a steady rise in positive marijuana tests, persistent methamphetamine use, a return of opiate test rates to early 2000s levels, and a notable increase in self-reported illicit fentanyl use.<sup>2</sup> A full summary of 2024 findings is provided in detail in the [2024 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region Bulletin](#).

### Highlight 1: Marijuana use has increased steadily across two decades

Positive marijuana test rates have steadily increased over the past two decades, rising from about one in three in the early 2000s to about one in two in the 2020s. In 2016, California passed Proposition 64 to legalize recreational marijuana, with full implementation beginning in 2018. While positive test rates did not increase immediately after legalization, they began rising more noticeably around 2020. Methods of obtaining marijuana also shifted: since legalization, a growing proportion of users have reported purchasing from legal recreational/business dispensaries. Still, illicit purchases remain common, with 54% of users in 2024 buying from street dealers (not shown).

**Figure 1: Positive Test Rates for Marijuana Among Adult Respondents (2004-2024)**



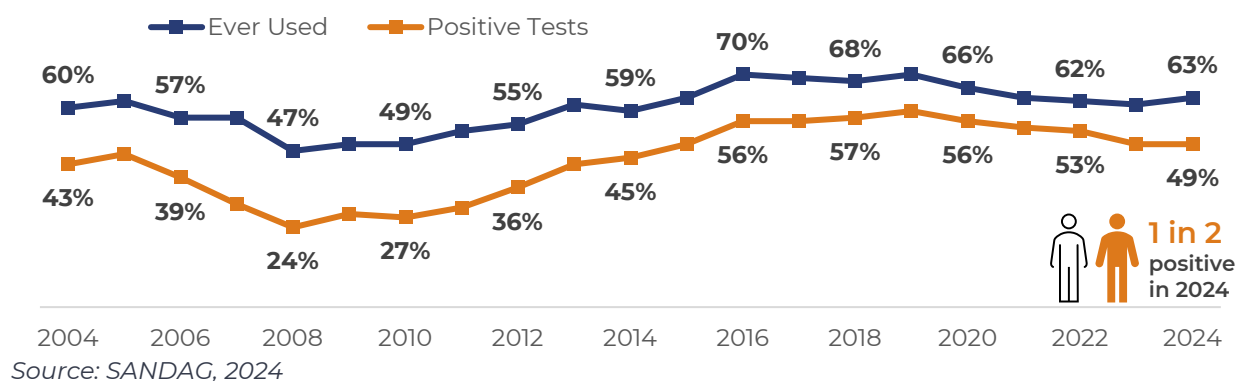
<sup>1</sup> Data should be interpreted with caution as sample sizes have decreased dramatically over the years, ranging from 229 to 926 (2024 and 2013, respectively). Additionally, this flash does not capture all substances tested for or inquired about in the study, which also tests for cocaine and PCP. These did not yield notable findings across the observed timeframe.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this report, the term 'opiates' refers to substances other than heroin, including morphine, hydrocodone, hydromorphone, and codeine. The drug test used in this study does not detect synthetic opioids such as fentanyl.

## Highlight 2: Meth use remains prevalent after a dip in the mid-2000s

Methamphetamine (meth) remains one of the most widely used substances among adult respondents. In 2004, three in five reported ever using meth, and over two in five tested positive. In the late 2000s, both of these measures declined, mirroring a countywide pattern. During this period, meth-related deaths, treatment admissions, and lab seizures fell significantly in the county.<sup>3</sup> However, these trends began to reverse in the early 2010s, with positive meth rates steadily rising from 27% in 2010 to 59% in 2019. This rise reflected broader trends in the county, including a surge in meth-related deaths and arrests for meth sales and possession during that time.<sup>4</sup> Positive meth rates in this study have dipped in recent years but remain high, with about half of respondents testing positive in 2024.

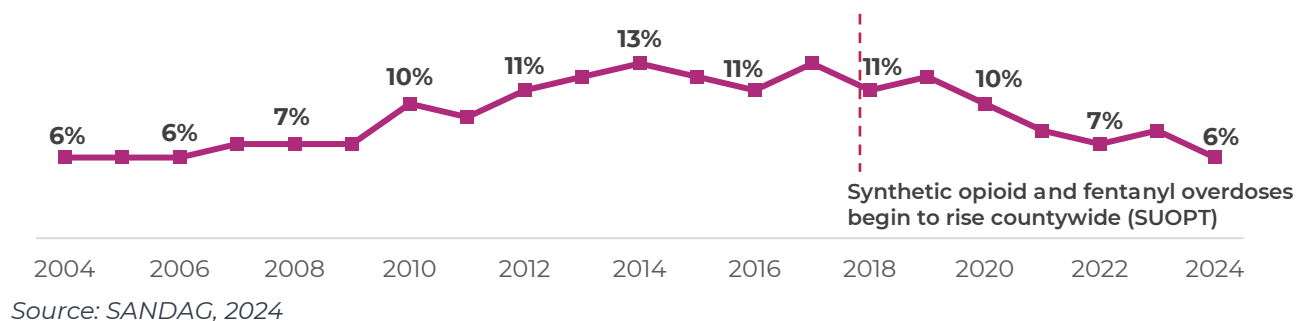
**Figure 2: Self-Reported Meth Use and Positive Meth Test Rates (2004-2024)**



## Highlight 3: Opiate test rates return to early 2000s levels as synthetic opioids rise

Positive test rates for opiates have remained relatively low in this study compared to rates for marijuana and meth. Rates rose modestly beginning in 2010—peaking at 13% in 2014—but have since returned to the same level recorded two decades ago. According to county data, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl have increasingly driven the third wave of the opioid epidemic, which began in 2018.<sup>5</sup> This shift is reflected in the growing share of unintentional overdose deaths involving these substances, while deaths linked to other opioids have declined. As this study does not currently detect synthetic opioids, direct evidence of their role in current use patterns among arrestees is not available.

**Figure 3: Positive Test Rates for Opiates (2004-2024)**



<sup>3</sup> County of San Diego. 2011. “Meth Abuse Declining in County.” San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency.

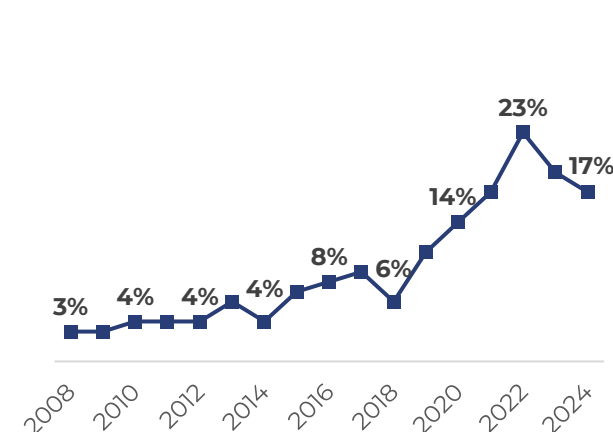
<sup>4</sup> Methamphetamine Strike Force, 2016 Report Card; Methamphetamine Strike Force, 2021 Report Card.

<sup>5</sup> San Diego County Substance Use and Overdose Prevention Taskforce. 2024. *Annual Report Card*.

## Highlight 4: Self-reported fentanyl use and reports of ever overdosing increased in tandem

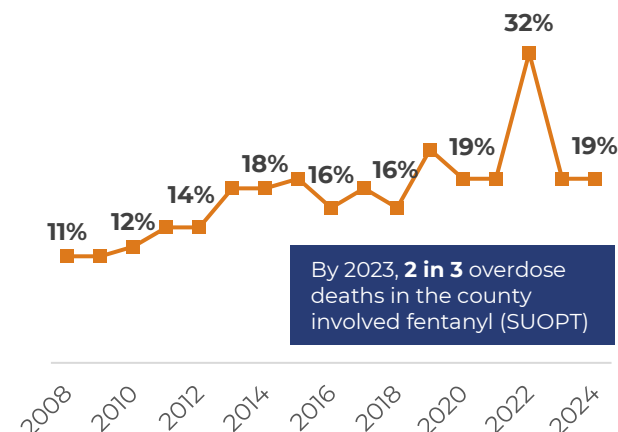
Illicit fentanyl use among adult arrestees remained low and stable through the early to mid-2010s, then rose sharply beginning in 2019—peaking at 23% in 2022 before declining slightly to 17% in 2024.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the percentage of respondents reporting ever overdosing follows a similar pattern, reaching a high of 32% in 2022, then decreasing over the last two years. While this parallel does not imply direct causality, the similar trends suggest a possible association. This is further supported by 2024 findings from this study, in which 44% of respondents who reported ever overdosing indicated fentanyl as the substance involved—more than any other substance mentioned. Across the county, the SUOPT reports that fentanyl-involved overdose deaths tripled between 2019 and 2023.<sup>7</sup>

**Figure 4: Percentage of Respondents Self-Reporting Illegal Fentanyl Use (2008-2024)**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

**Figure 5: Percentage of Respondents who Report Ever Overdosing on Any Substance (2008-2024)**



Source: SANDAG, 2024

SANDAG gratefully acknowledges the project staff, organizations, and community members whose contributions over the years have been essential to this effort. We are also grateful for the ongoing cooperation and support of our funding and agency partners, including the San Diego County Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services, the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, and various others in public safety, health, and justice. SANDAG's Criminal Justice Research Division remains committed to generating critical insights to inform our understanding of pressing issues facing our community.

<sup>6</sup> As part of the broader set of drug use questions, respondents are asked whether they had ever used fentanyl with a prescription (legally), without a prescription (illegally), or both. Figure 4 reflects those who reported using it without a prescription at any given moment, including those who reported using it both legally and illegally. Data on illicit fentanyl use is only available beginning in 2008.

<sup>7</sup> San Diego County Substance Use and Overdose Prevention Taskforce. 2024. [Annual Report Card](#).

