

2025 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

August 2026

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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 2025, the SUM program was supported by 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 Brief is the first in a four-part series presenting SUM data collected through interviews during the 2025 calendar year. It includes information pertaining to self-reported substance use, perceived risk and availability of various drugs, characteristics and risk factors, and how these factors may be related to substance use of youths booked into local jails.

A total of 33 youth participated in this confidential study, including 15 from the Youth Transition Campus (YTC) and 17 from San Diego Achievement Centers.² The 2025 data collection cycle reflects the lowest sample size to date, largely due to structural changes that have reduced the number of youth entering detention in the San Diego region.³ In recent years, the county has expanded diversion programs, increased community-based alternatives, and adopted booking practices that prioritize non-custodial responses for many offenses. Consequently, sample sizes have fallen in accordance with these changes.

As a result of the reduced sample size, the 2025 findings are presented in a CJ brief as opposed to a standard CJ bulletin. This format allows for a more focused presentation of results while maintaining analytical integrity. Additionally, while urinalysis testing has historically been a component of this research, collection was limited during the 2025 interview cycle and is therefore not included in this brief.

What information is collected through these interviews?

- Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 3)
- First substance ever tried (page 4)
- Vaping trends (page 4)
- Illicit use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs (page 5)
- Previous drug treatment and perception of current need for treatment (page 5)
- Risk factors related to home environment, mental health, and drug overdoses (page 6)
- Risky behaviors and previous criminal justice involvement (page 7)
- Summary (page 7)

¹ Launched by the County of San Diego in FY 2020, Achievement Centers offer at-risk youth and youth on probation after-school programming that provides opportunities to engage in prosocial and rehabilitation services 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. For the purpose of this study, only youth on probation were interviewed.

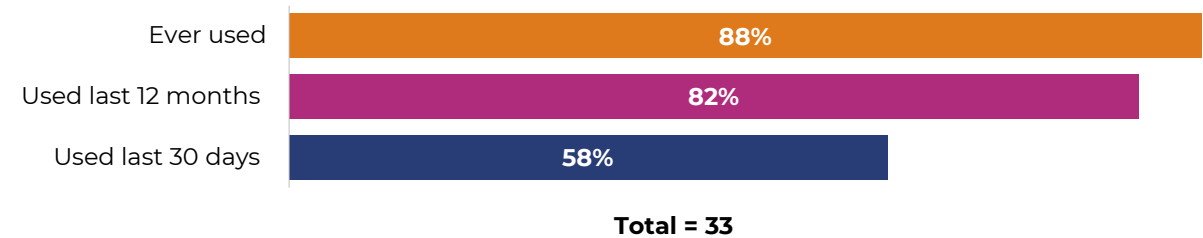
³ The Youth Transition Campus (YTC) previously operated as the Kearny Mesa Juvenile Hall, with average daily populations exceeding 250 youth in 2010 and remaining above 150 through 2015. Following its reopening as a Transitional Campus in 2024, average daily populations continued to decline, reaching 83 in 2025. BSCC (Board of State and Community Corrections). "[Juvenile Detention Profile Survey Dashboards – BSCC](https://www.bscc.ca.gov/jdps-dashboard/)." <https://www.bscc.ca.gov/jdps-dashboard/>.

How many interviewed youth ever tried illicit substances?

Interview data from 2025 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 (88%) reported ever using either alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, or methamphetamine (meth). Among those, 82% reported using at least one of these substances in the last 12 months, and of those, over half (58%) reported using within the last 30 days (Figure 1). On average, respondents tried 2.7 different substances (SD = 0.96), ranging from 1 to 6.

Among the 33 interviewed youth in 2025, the majority were male (88%), identified as Hispanic/Latino(a) (84%), with an average age of 15.7 years. Most were enrolled in school at the time of the interview (79%).

Figure 1: Self-Reported Substance Use History by Timeframe

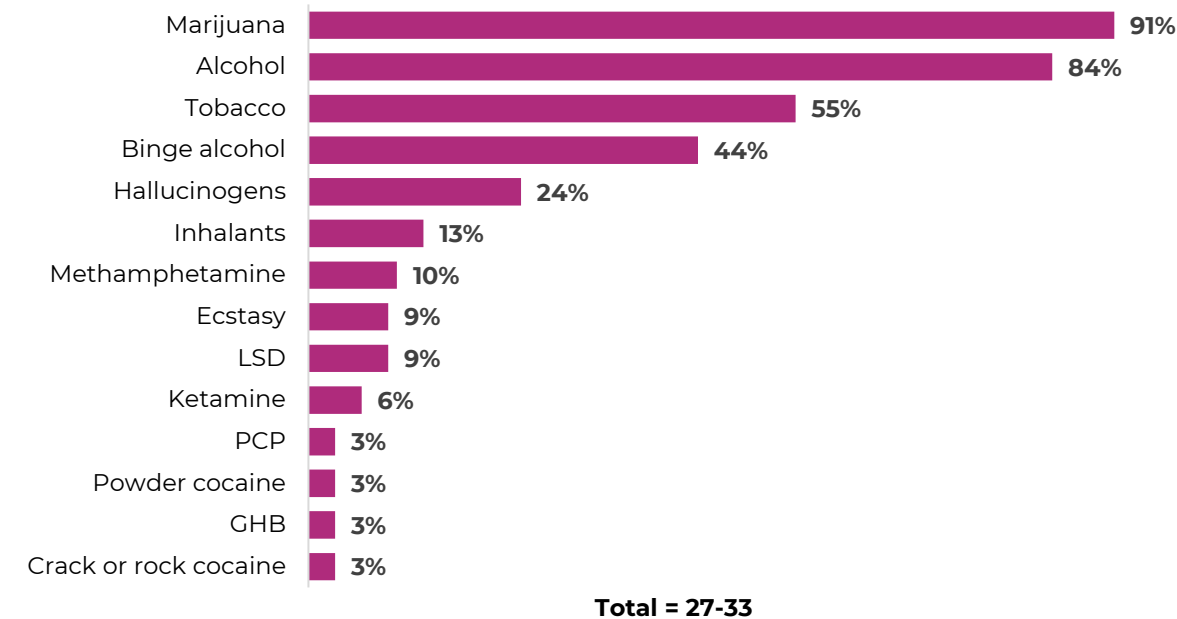


Source: SANDAG, 2025

What were the patterns of substance use?

Consistent with previous years, marijuana (91%) and alcohol (84%) were the most commonly used substances among those interviewed, followed by tobacco (55%) (Figure 2). Tobacco use has steadily declined over time, with the 2025 figure marking one of the lowest rates since 2008, when about three in four (74%) reported ever trying it.

Figure 2: Rates of Self-Reported Substance Use Among Interviewed Youth



Note: Substances with no reported use, such as heroin, spice, and kratom, are not included in Figure 2.
Source: SANDAG, 2025

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 3). Tobacco and binge alcohol drinking follow closely behind, with an average initiation age of 13.1 and 13.4, respectively. Methamphetamine use appears slightly later, but before the age of 15.

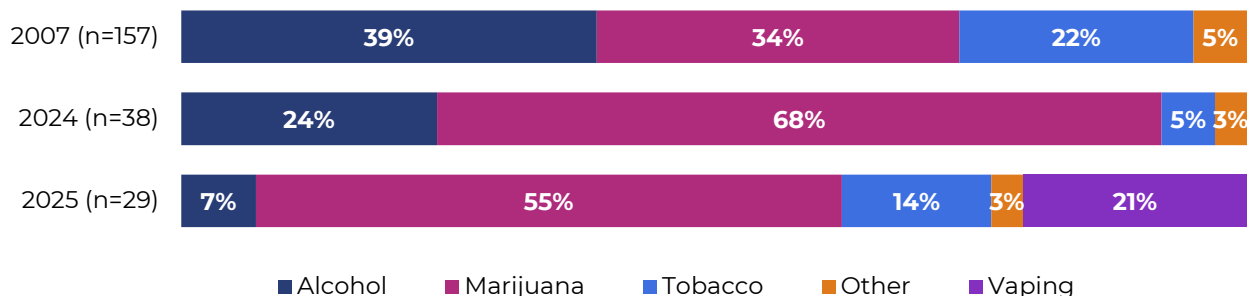
Figure 3: Average Age at Initial Substance Use



Note: Cases with missing information and/or a respondent size less than three are excluded from Figure 3.
Source: SANDAG, 2025

When this 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 4). Since then, the trend has shifted, with marijuana becoming increasingly common as the first substance youth experiment with. By 2024, most youth (68%) reported marijuana as their first substance. In 2025, this dropped to 55%, alongside an increase in youth reporting vaping as their first substance.

Figure 4: First Substance Ever Tried Among Interviewed Youth



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2025

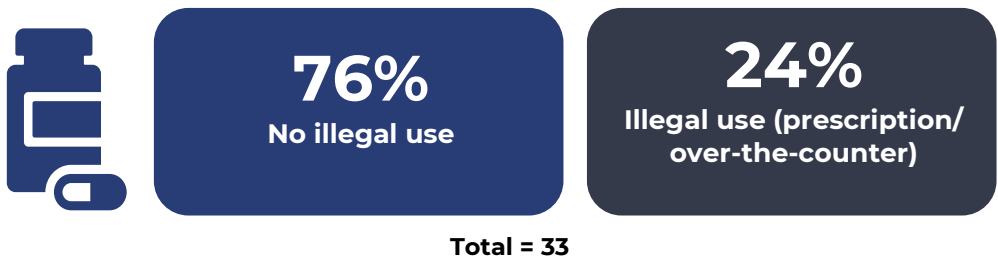
What do youth report about vaping as tobacco use declines?

While tobacco use has declined among this population, interview data from recent years suggests that vaping is replacing traditional tobacco products. In 2025, 73% reported ever vaping, and among those, 79% had vaped in the past 30 days, averaging about 13.5 days of use. Nearly three-fourths (71%) said they had vaped at school, underscoring its normalization. When asked about their preferences, most (68%) said they preferred vaping over smoking cigarettes—not because they see it as safer (86% do not believe vaping is less harmful), but because of its convenience and flavors. Flavored nicotine products were especially common, used by nearly all youth who vaped (96%), compared to marijuana/THC (58%), and non-flavored nicotine (25%). Most youth reported obtaining their vapes from friends or acquaintances (64%). Over three in five (63%) reported ever getting sick from vaping.

How many youth used prescription drugs illegally in 2025?

Misuse of prescription or over-the-counter medications includes using these substances without a valid prescription or in ways not intended by a healthcare provider, such as taking higher doses than prescribed or using them recreationally. In 2025, 24% of respondents reported having ever engaged in this behavior (Figure 5), down from 34% in 2024 and 52% in 2023. While the smaller sample size in 2025 may contribute to some of this decline, the pattern suggests a potential reduction in prescription and over-the-counter medication misuse that warrants continued monitoring in future years.

Figure 5: Illegal Prescription or Over-the-Counter Drug Use Among Interviewed Youth



Source: SANDAG, 2025

Among the eight youth who reported ever misusing prescription drugs, tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium; sometimes referred to as “tranqs” or “roofies”) were the most commonly reported substance, cited by five youth. Codeine was reported by three youth, while ketamine and OxyContin/oxycodone were each reported by two. Morphine, fentanyl, and Vicodin were each reported by one youth.

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 (24%) reported prior experience with drug treatment for alcohol or drugs. On average, these youth had participated in treatment twice. Pathways into treatment varied, with three youth reporting being court-ordered to attend, while the remaining five entered treatment voluntarily or with the encouragement of their parents. Five youth had participated in outpatient treatment programs, and three had received inpatient care. Drug treatment was mainly for marijuana and alcohol use (seven youth each), while two youth reported treatment for prescription pill misuse. Among those with treatment experience, six reported successfully completing their most recent treatment program.

Current need or desire for drug treatment

In addition to asking about prior treatment experiences, all youth 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 (88%), only six youth (18%) expressed interest in seeking treatment, mentioning marijuana, prescription pills, and alcohol.

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 (88%) were living in stable housing, such as a house, apartment, or mobile home.
- Living with both parents was relatively uncommon among interviewed youth. Only 23% reported living with both parents, while 17% reported living with neither parent. Among those residing in a stable residence, mothers were nearly twice as likely as fathers to be part of the household (70% and 37%, respectively).
- Around one-third (30%) said their immediate family had some type of prior involvement with Child Welfare Services (CWS). Three youth (9%) reported ever being in foster care.
- Parental substance misuse was relatively common: 41% of youth said their parents had ever abused alcohol, while nearly one in four (23%) disclosed parental use of illegal drugs other than marijuana—most often methamphetamine.
- Many youth reported having family members with prior justice system involvement. Specifically, 43% indicated that a parent or guardian had been arrested and booked, and 36% reported that a sibling had experienced the same.

Mental health

- One-third of respondents (33%) reported having seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavioral, or mental health concerns.
- More than one-fifth (22%) reported having been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or psychological condition; all of these respondents had been prescribed medication for their condition.
- Nearly one-third (31%) reported that, at some point in their lives, their mental, emotional, or psychological health had interfered with daily activities or their ability to achieve personal goals.

Overdoses

- Four youth (13%) reported ever having a drug overdose (excluding alcohol). Two of these youth cited marijuana as the source of their overdose, while the other two cited prescription medication (Xanax and cough medicine).
- Two of those four youth had naloxone administered when they overdosed, once by a friend and once by fire/EMS.

Home environment

88%

stable housing

43%

parental criminal history

41%

parental alcohol abuse

30%

previous CWS contact

Mental health

33%

have seen a mental health professional

22%

have a psychological or mental health diagnosis

System involvement

42%

previous arrest

What did youth tell us about their experiences with criminal or risky behaviors?

Previous criminal justice involvement

- Over two-fifths (42%) reported having been arrested or booked at least once before their most recent arrest, with an average of 2 prior arrests (ranging from 1 to 6). Of those, a majority (93%) had served time.
- Among youth with prior arrests, over three-fifths (62%) said they had participated in a diversion or alternative sanction program. Community service was the most commonly cited, along with two mentions of Achievement Centers (COMPACT).
- When asked about their first arrest, nearly half of the youth (46%) said it involved a property crime, 46% reported a violent crime, and 31% cited a weapons-related offense crime (respondents could select more than one response).

Gang affiliation

- Around two-fifths (42%) of interviewed youth said they were in a gang or had hung out with gang members at some point, with a majority (86%) having done so within the last five years. On average, they first got involved with gangs around the age of 11.4 (age range 6 to 15).
- Among the youth who reported gang affiliation, nine (69%) currently identify as gang members, while five (31%) reported former associations.

Summary

This CJ Brief presents data on substance use among juvenile arrestees in the San Diego region, revealing patterns of early and frequent use. In 2025, most interviewed youth reported lifetime use of substances such as alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs. Initiation often occurred early, with alcohol and marijuana use commonly beginning around age 12 and use of other illicit substances, including methamphetamine and powder cocaine, typically reported before age 15. Misuse of prescription and over-the-counter medications was also reported and frequently occurred alongside other substance use; however, the proportion of youth reporting this behavior has declined in recent years.

Interview data indicate that substance use frequently co-occurs with broader life challenges, including unstable living situations, parental histories of substance use and justice system involvement, mental health concerns, and involvement in gangs. Together, these findings underscore the interconnected factors shaping substance use and other high-risk behaviors among justice-involved youth.