

## Females in the Justice System: Gender Differences from the SAM Interview

Since 2000, SANDAG has conducted interviews in local detention facilities<sup>1</sup> with individuals who were recently arrested and consent to participate in a confidential and anonymous interview as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) project. With the release of 20 years of data, this CJ Flash includes additional analyses regarding gender differences between the adult males and females interviewed. Over the past several decades, a greater proportion of women have been incarcerated and research has repeatedly shown the different pathways that may lead a female to justice system contact. These differences also suggest potential gender-responsive treatments and reentry strategies.<sup>2</sup>

### Highlight 1

Consistent with research<sup>2</sup>, the self-reported criminal history of female and male arrestees varied, with females being older, on average, when they were first arrested, and to report their first arrest was for a drug offense. Their current charge was also more likely to be for a drug-related offense. Females were also less likely than males to report ever having been arrested as a minor or to have ever served time in prison or been on probation.

females  
more  
likely to...



males  
more  
likely to...



Have a first arrest that was a drug offense  
**(38% vs. 25%)**

Be arrested at an earlier age on average  
**(21.0 vs. 25.2)**

Have a current arrest that was a drug offense  
**(45% vs. 31%)**

Be arrested as a minor  
**(45% vs. 24%)**

Have ever been on probation  
**(85% vs. 63%)**

Have served time in prison  
**(38% vs. 14%)**

### Highlight 2

Female arrestees had some different drug use patterns compared to males, as shown below, and consistent with the criminal history information presented in Highlight 1. These differences from male arrestees included using meth more recently and frequently, using heroin more frequently, and using crack more recently. Interestingly, females were more likely than males to report that they would complete treatment, even if it was not required (65% vs. 53%) and that their most recent treatment experience was voluntary (61% vs. 37%).

	Females	Males
Used meth in the past 12 months (of those who ever tried)	93%	80%
Number of days used meth in past 30	20.7	17.3
Positive for meth	66%	55%
Number of days used heroin in past 30	22.0	12.8
Used crack in the past 12 months (of those who ever tried)	30%	14%

<sup>1</sup> Additional information about the SAM study is available at [sandag.org/sam](http://sandag.org/sam).

<sup>2</sup> Ramirez, R. (2016). Reentry considerations for justice involved women. Available at: <https://cjinvolwedwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Reentry-Considerations-for-Justice-Involved-Women-FINAL.pdf>

## Highlight 3

Research has shown that many women with justice system involvement have a history of poverty, trauma, abuse, and marginalization. Consistent with this, the females interviewed for SAM in 2019 were more likely to describe their marital status as divorced, separated, or widowed and less likely to report they were working full-time (even though they were more likely to have pursued some type of education after high school). They were also more likely to report being approached by someone wanting to pimp them and to have exchanged sex for something. In addition, of those females who reported any history of being homeless, a greater percentage said they first became homeless because of an abusive situation (compared to males). Females were also more likely to report being a victim of a crime they did not report and of those who reported ever being a victim of a crime they did not report, females were more likely to report the crime was domestic violence (32% vs. 10%) or rape (41% vs. 9%). When asked why they did not report the crime, females were more likely than males to say they were scared to do so (33% vs. 5%).

### Females were more likely to report



Being divorced/  
separated/widowed,  
compared to males  
(25% vs. 15%)

Ever being approached  
to be pimped  
(36% vs. 7%)

If they were ever homeless,  
that they became homeless  
because of abuse  
(20% vs. 4%)

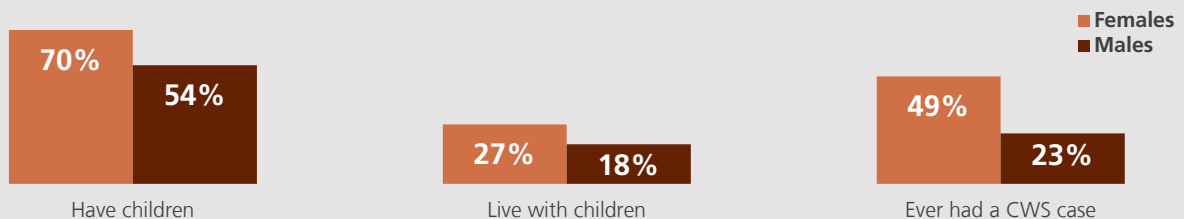
They exchanged sex  
for something  
(17% vs. 5%)

They had ever been the  
victim of a crime they did  
not report to police  
(46% vs. 32%)

They did not report the  
crime because they were  
scared of retaliation  
(33% vs. 5%)

## Highlight 4

According to best practice, understanding the role of children's involvement in women's lives is important for successful reentry for female offenders. Analyses showed that compared to male arrestees, females were more likely to report having or living with children and have ever had an open case with Child Welfare Services (CWS).



### Takeaway

- While the rate of drug use is high for both male and female arrestees, addressing this risk factor both during incarceration and in the community may be even more important for female arrestees.
- Females were more likely to report a willingness to complete treatment than males. To support success, programs should focus on creating an environment based on safety, respect, dignity, and self-sufficiency.
- Reentry policies, practices, and programs for women should be relational and focus on promoting healthy connections with others, including children.