

Highlights

About three in five juveniles tested positive for at least one drug

About three in every five (58%) youth interviewed in detention in 2021 tested positive for at least one substance, which is a slight decrease from the previous year (60%).

Marijuana was the first substance tried by most of the youth interviewed

A majority of youth (74%) reported marijuana as their first tried substance, with use starting around the age of 12, on average. It is important to note that for the first time, youth were interviewed both in custody and at San Diego County Achievement Centers.

Prescription drug usage has decreased dramatically among surveyed juveniles

Around one in three (36%) of youth reported ever abusing prescription drugs. This year, the most frequently abused prescription drug was tranquilizers, with 29% of youth reporting ever using.

Majority of youth have vaped

Eighty-seven percent (87%) of the youth interviewed reported ever vaping. The most common substances vaped included flavored nicotine (93%) and marijuana/THC (80%). About two-thirds (65%) reported vaping at school and 54% thought that vaping was less harmful than smoking cigarettes.

About two in five youth surveyed have had a gun

Around two in every five (44%) youth surveyed reported ever having a gun. Of the youth that reported having a gun, 88% of them reported that it was **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** to obtain.

Background

When the juvenile component of the nationally-funded ADAM (Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring) program was discontinued in 2003 (one year before the entire program ended), local funding was secured, which enabled this important data collection effort to continue in the region as the San Diego County Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. SAM is unique in that while most data tracking drug use trends over time rely solely on self-reporting, SAM includes an objective measure of recent drug use over time with the analysis of a voluntary urine sample that is confidential and anonymous.

This CJ Bulletin - 2021 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region - is the second in a four-part series presenting SAM data collected (from both juveniles and adults) in the 2021 calendar year. As part of this study, 40 youth from Juvenile Hall were interviewed virtually¹. Additionally, because the number of youth booked into Juvenile Hall has considerably decreased in recent years, 15 additional youth were interviewed at San Diego Achievement Centers² as a part of this year's sampling efforts. Because Achievement Centers are an alternative to youth detention facilities, it is important to note that not all youth have been adjudicated and urine samples were not obtained from these youth. Since this is the first year including youth involved in alternatives to detention in the sample, it is important to note that this year's sample may differ from samples of prior years.

In 2021, San Diego County SAM was supported by the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) and the County of San Diego. 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 research bulletin includes the results of urinalysis trends over time for youth interviewed in detention³, as well as information pertaining to lifetime and recent self-reported drug use, perceived risk and availability of different drugs, characteristics of the youth interviewed, and how these factors may be related to drug use. In addition, all of the data (percentages and raw numbers) captured through the juvenile interviews and urinalyses for the past five years (2017–2021) are available online at sandag.org/cj. For questions regarding the project methodology or data, please contact the SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division at (619) 699-1900.

What information is collected through these interviews?

Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 4)

Urinalysis result trends over time (page 8)

Perceptions of how harmful drugs are and how easy they are to get (page 9)

Illicit use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs (page 11)

Previous drug treatment and perception of current need for treatment (page 14)

Risk factors related to home environment, mental health, and school attendance (page 15)

Criminal and other risk behavior (page 16)

¹ While these interviews are usually conducted in the Juvenile Hall facility, due to COVID-19, these interviews were conducted through virtual meeting platforms and over-the-phone.

² Achievement Centers were launched by the County of San Diego in Fiscal Year 2020. The purpose of Achievement Centers is to provide at-risk youth and youth on probation after-school programming that provides opportunities to engage in prosocial and rehabilitation services in the community and divert them from detention.

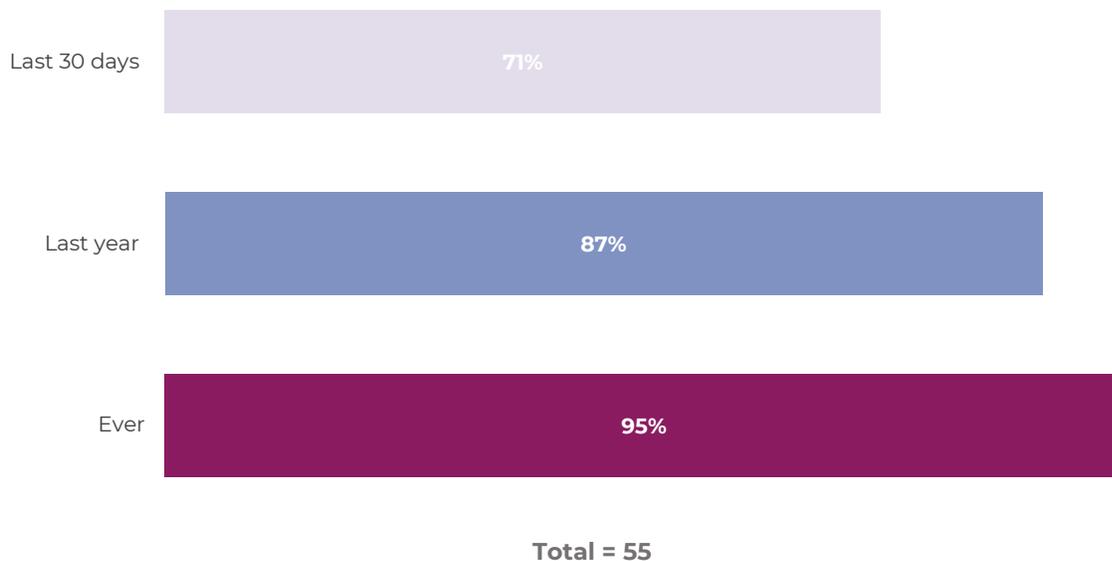
³ One hundred percent (100%) of the interviewed youth from Juvenile Hall provided a urine sample for drug testing purposes (26 males and 14 females).

How many youth with justice system contact had ever tried illicit substances?

In 2021, almost all (95%) of the youth interviewed reported ever trying an illicit substance, which includes alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine (meth), and ecstasy. The majority of youth also reported recent use of at least one of these substances – 87% in the last year and 71% in the last 30 days (Figure 1).

Of the youth who reported ever trying one of these substances, the average (mean) number of drugs tried was 3 (range 1 to 6).

Figure 1
Almost all juveniles interviewed reported previous substance use



Source: SANDAG, 2022

Takeaway

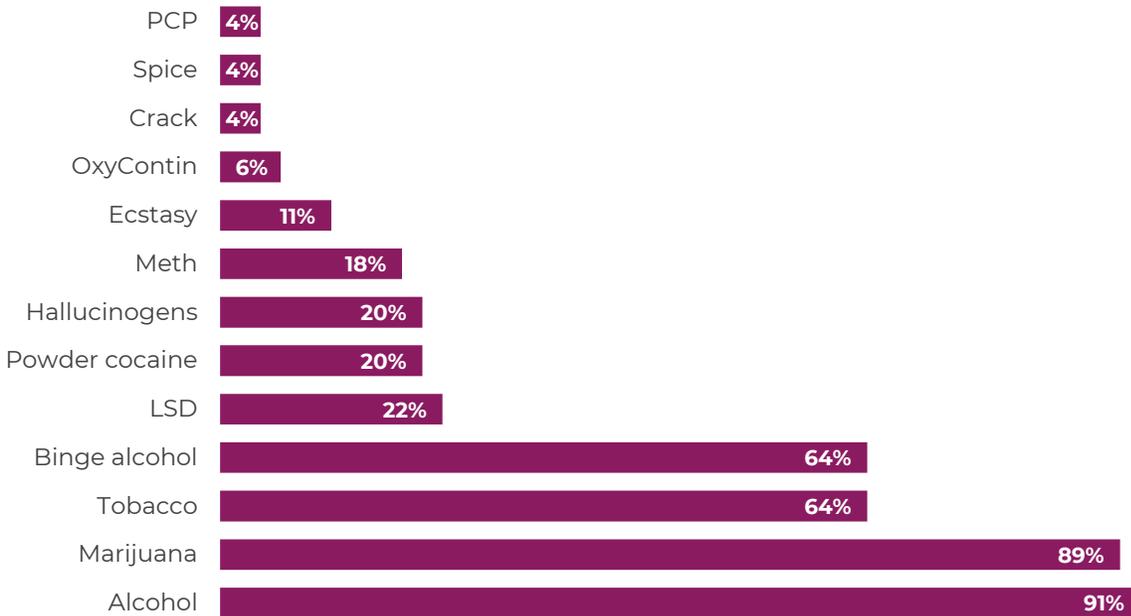
Almost all youth interviewed reported experimentation with illicit substances. Nearly three-fourths had used substances in the past 30 days and the average number of substances ever tried was 3.

What is the pattern of initiating substance use among youth interviewed?

Similar to prior years, alcohol (91%) and marijuana (89%) were the most frequently tried substances, followed by tobacco (64%). Sixty-four percent (64%) of the youth also reported binge drinking alcohol (defined as 5 or more drinks on one occasion for males and 4 or more for females) (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Marijuana and alcohol remain top two substances most often tried by youth



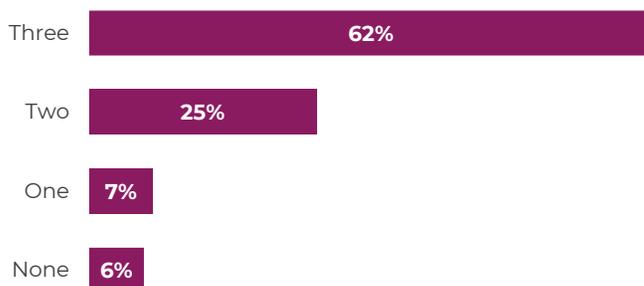
Total = 54-55

Source: SANDAG, 2022

Around two-thirds (62%) of the youth interviewed reported they had tried all three gateway drugs (i.e., alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco), as opposed to just one (7%) or two (25%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco have been tried by a majority of interviewed youth

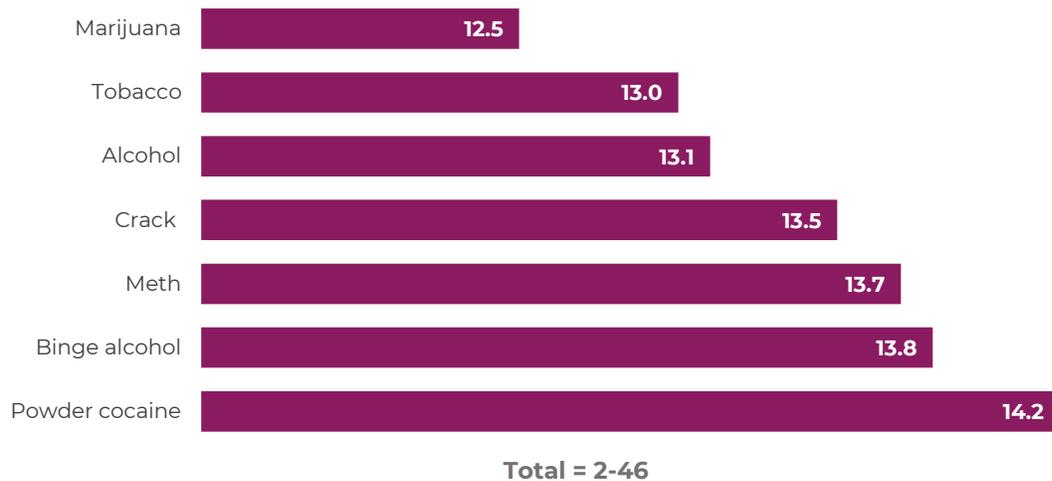


Total = 55

Source: SANDAG, 2022

For many of these youth, marijuana use started first, around the age of 12.5, followed by tobacco at 13.0, and alcohol at 13.1, on average. Binge alcohol use, on average, appeared to start less than one year after initial alcohol use (Figure 4).

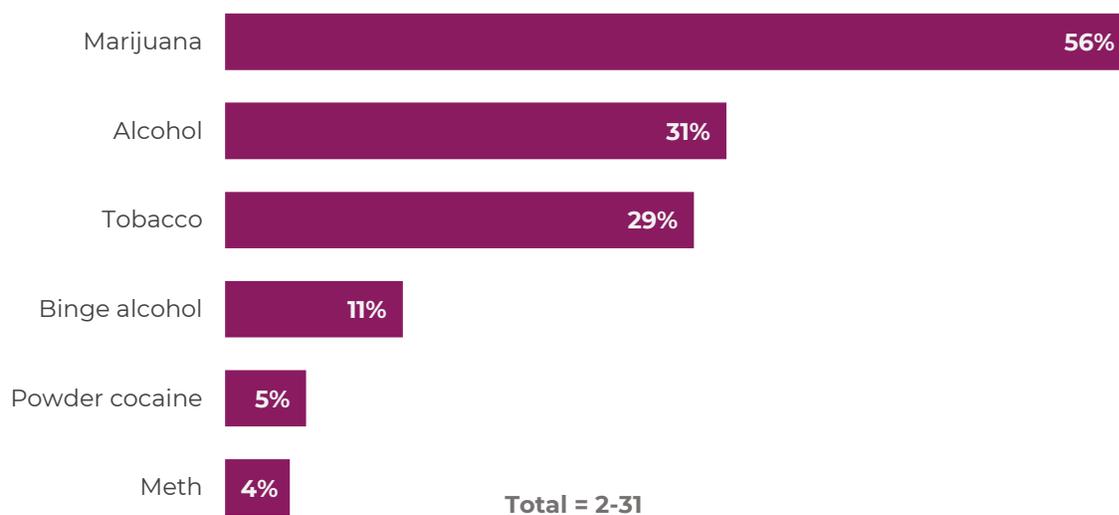
Figure 4
Marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol use start before or around 13, on average



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

When considering the percentage of youth who had recently (i.e., past 30 days) used a drug of those who had tried it, the greatest percentage was associated with marijuana (56%) and was followed by alcohol (31%) and tobacco (29%) (Figure 5).

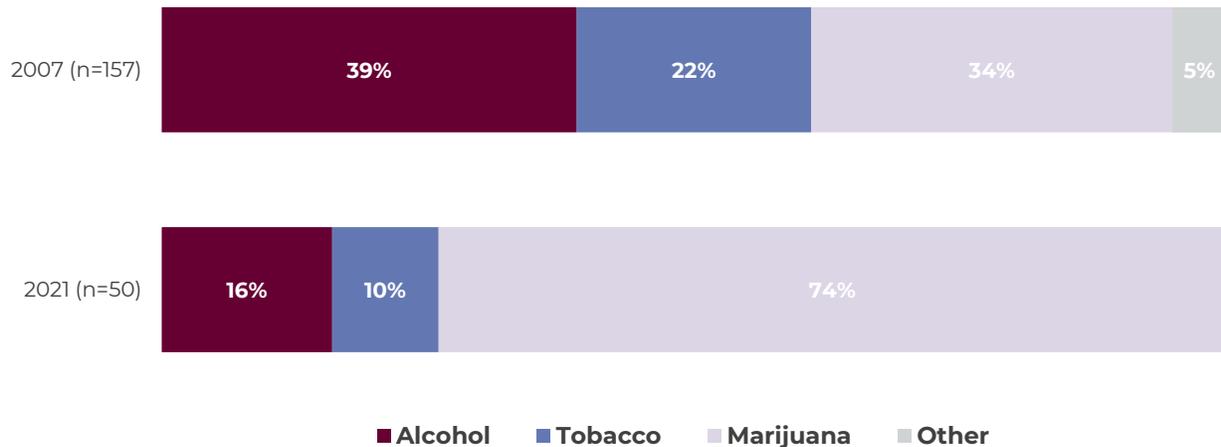
Figure 5
Just under three in five youth who have tried marijuana reported using it in the past 30 days



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

In 2007, when the question was first asked, slightly more youth reported that alcohol was the first substance they had ever tried (39%), compared to marijuana (34%). In 2021, the majority of youth reported marijuana as the first ever tried substance (74%), followed by alcohol (16%), and tobacco (10%) (Figure 6).

Figure 6
Marijuana was the first substance tried by most youth in 2021



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

In a newer series of questions, youth were asked about their history and perception of vaping.

- Almost nine in ten (87%) of the youth said they had ever vaped and almost two-thirds (63%) of those who had ever vaped reported vaping in the past 30 days. Of those who vaped in the past 30 days, the average (mean) number of days vaped was 17.5 (range 1 to 30).
- When asked what substances they had vaped, the most common responses were flavored nicotine (93%) and marijuana/THC (80%). In addition, 24% reported vaping non-flavored nicotine.
- Around two-thirds (65%) reported vaping at school.
- Over four-fifths (83%) said they preferred vaping to smoking cigarettes and more than half (54%) thought vaping was less harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- When asked how bad they thought vaping was, 61% of youth who had vaped before thought vaping was **“VERY BAD”** or **“EXTREMELY BAD”** compared to 83% of youth who had never vaped before.
- Around one in four (23%) said they had ever gotten sick from vaping.

How many youth interviewed at Juvenile Hall tested positive for an illicit substance?

Fifty-eight percent (58%) of juveniles interviewed at Juvenile Hall in 2021 tested positive for an illicit substance – marijuana, meth, cocaine/crack, PCP, and/or opiates – a slight decrease from the 60% reported in 2020. The most common substance juveniles test positive for every year is marijuana, with 55% testing positive in 2021. While this was also a slight decrease from 2020, it is tied for the third highest positive rate in the past 22 years (Figure 7). Also shown in Figure 7, the percent positive for meth decreased to a new 22-year low at 3%.

Figure 7

About 3 in 5 juveniles tested positive for at least one drug in 2021



Total = 40-354

Note: Cases with missing information not included. In 2013 and 2014, any drug did not include testing for PCP.
Source: SANDAG, 2022

In terms of other drugs, 5% of the youth tested positive for cocaine/crack (an increase from the 2% in 2020) and none were positive for opiates (compared to 2% that were positive in 2020). In 2021, 5% tested positive for multiple illicit drugs, and both of these youth who tested positive for multiple substances were positive for marijuana and cocaine.

When youth were asked who their main source for information about drugs was, 47% said friends, 28% said the internet or television, 14% said parents, and 11% said school.

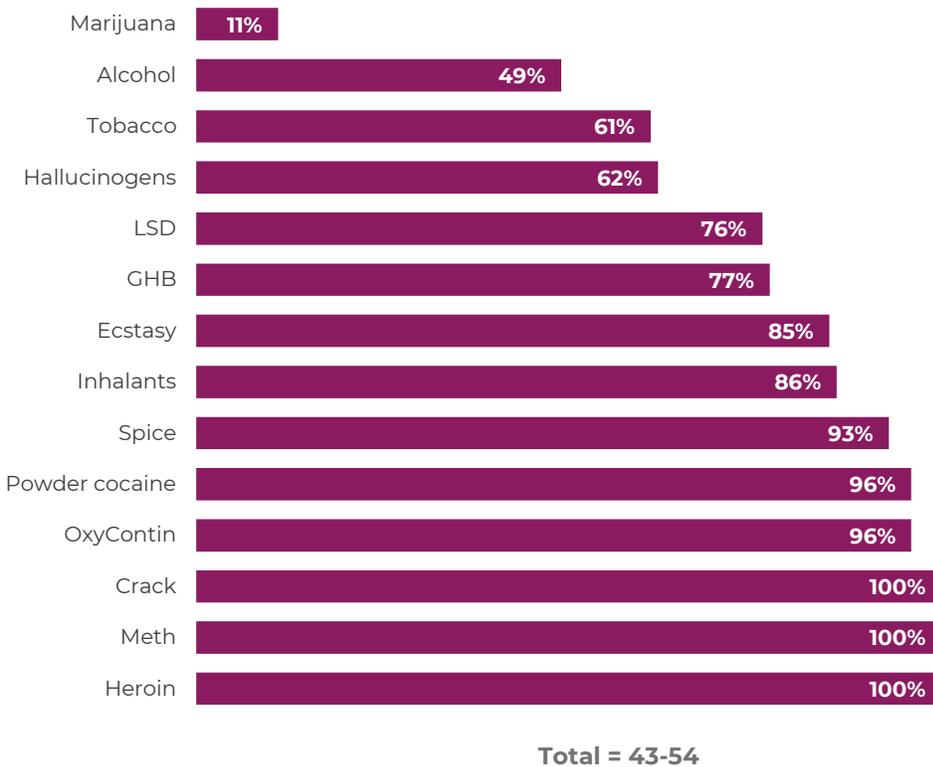
Takeaway

Almost three in five youth interviewed in 2021 were positive for at least one drug. Only 3% were positive for meth, the lowest positive rate in the past 22 years.

What are youth's perception of how harmful different substances are?

When asked how bad they thought different drugs were for them (on a four-point scale), there was more perceived harm than in previous years, with three-fifths or more of youth perceiving a majority of the listed substances as being **“EXTREMELY BAD”** or **“VERY BAD.”** Only half (49%) of the surveyed youth thought alcohol was harmful and only around one in ten (11%) perceived marijuana as being harmful for the user (Figure 8).

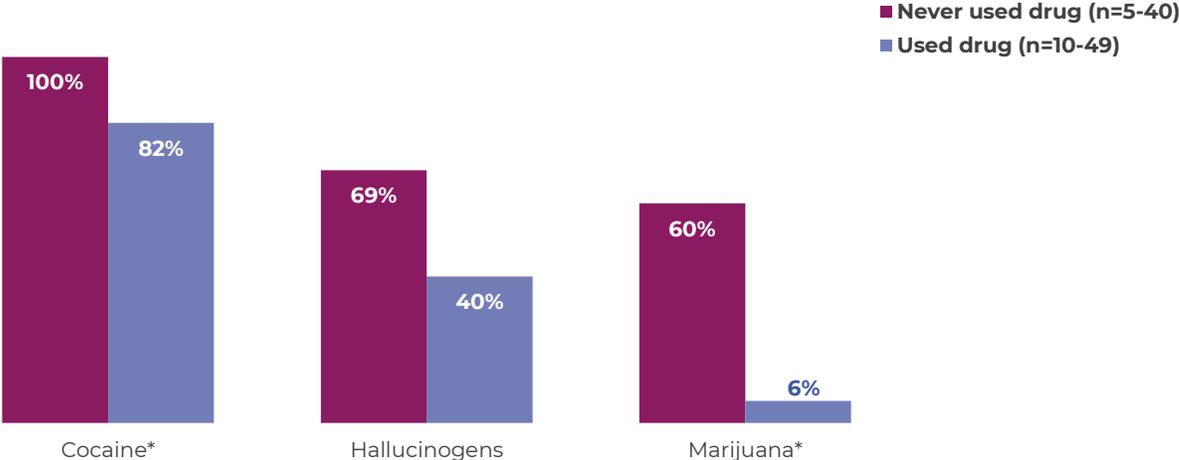
Figure 8
Only around 1 in 10 youth think marijuana is harmful



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2022

For some drugs, perception of harm differed significantly by whether a youth had previously used it, including cocaine, hallucinogens, and marijuana. That is, those who had ever tried a drug were less likely to perceive it was harmful, compared to those who had not (Figure 9).

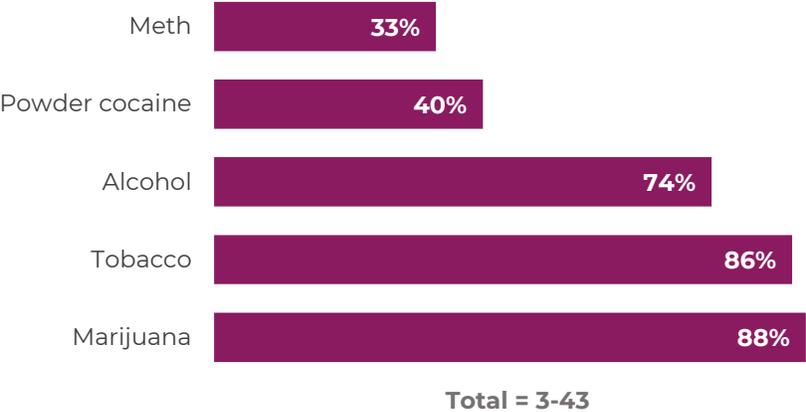
Figure 9
Some drugs perceived as less harmful by those who had used them



*Significant at $p < .05$
 Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

According to the youth, marijuana (88%) and tobacco (86%), the two substances tried at the earliest ages, on average, were most likely to be described as **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** to obtain (Figure 10).

Figure 10
Youth say that marijuana and tobacco are the easiest substances to obtain



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

Takeaway

Youth perceive marijuana, tobacco, and alcohol as the least harmful substances and report that they are the easiest to obtain.

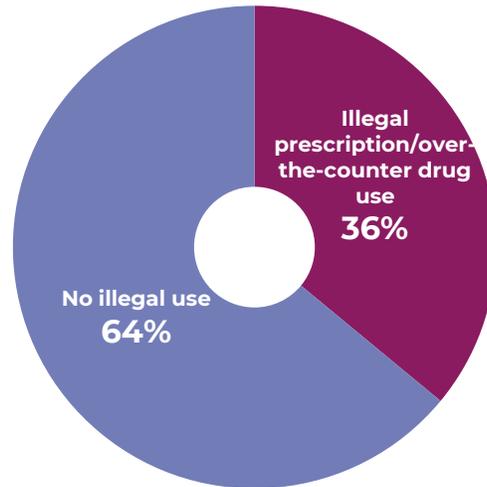
When youth who had ever used alcohol were asked how they most recently obtained it, the most common responses included someone 21 years or older gave it to them (28%), they bought it (17%), they had someone else buy it for them (13%), they took it from their own home or someone else’s home (13%), someone under 21 gave it to them (9%), or they took it from a store (9%).

How many youth are using prescription drugs illegally?

Just over one-third (36%) of surveyed youth reported ever using prescription and/or over-the-counter medication illegally (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Over one-third of juveniles have illegally used prescription or over-the-counter drugs



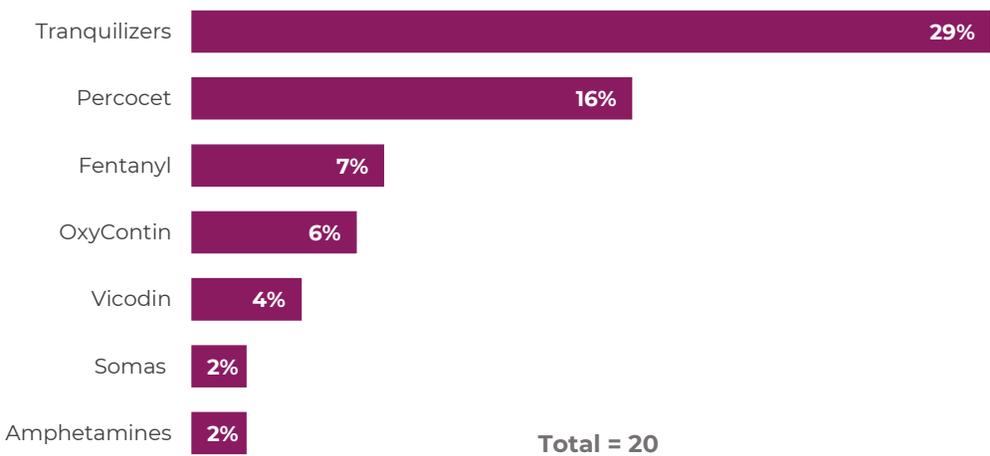
Total = 55

Source: SANDAG, 2022

Of all prescription painkillers⁴, Percocet (16%), fentanyl (7%), OxyContin (6%), and Vicodin (4%) were the only painkillers youth ever abused. In addition to prescription painkillers, other abused prescription drugs included tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rohypnol/Roachas) (29%), Somas (2%), and amphetamines (2%) (Figure 12).

Figure 12

Tranquilizers, Percocet, and fentanyl among most abused prescription drugs by youth



Total = 20

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2022

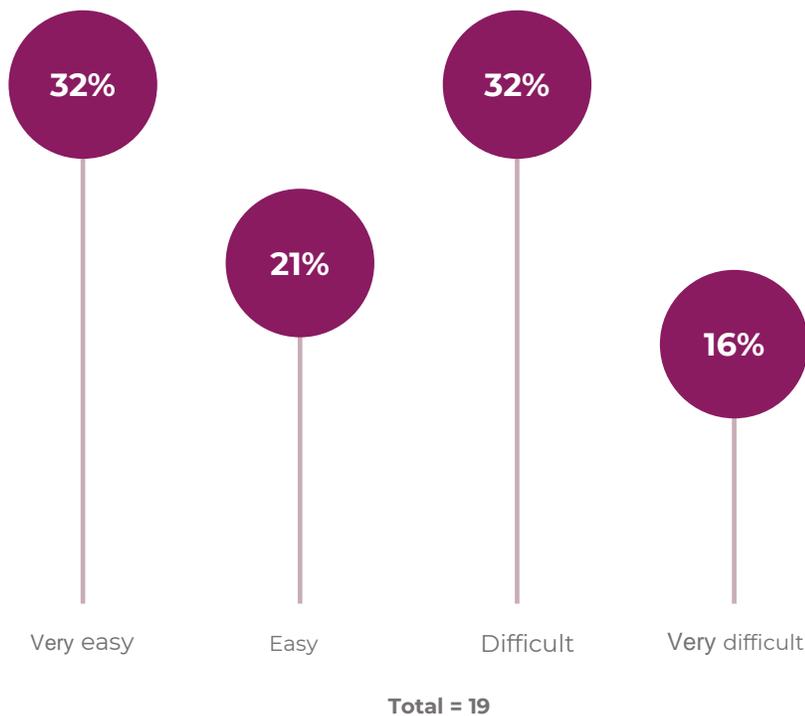
⁴ Prescription painkillers include methadone, Suboxone, Dilaudid, Percocet, Vicodin, Demerol, fentanyl, morphine, OxyContin, tramadol, and Darvon.

Compared to the previous year, the youth interviewed in 2021 reported abusing prescription drugs at an exponentially lower rate (54% reported in 2020). This decrease can even be seen in the highest abused prescription drug of 2021, tranquilizers, which decreased from 34% in 2020 to 29% in 2021. Other prescription drugs (i.e., anti-depressants, barbiturates, Codeine, Darvon, Demerol, Dilaudid, Ketamine, methadone, morphine, tramadol, and suboxone) were not included in Figure 12 as 0% of youth reported ever abusing them.

Of those who ever used a specific prescription drug illegally (Figure 11), youth only reported recent use of Percocet (20%) and tranquilizers (18%). Almost equal proportions of youth who had abused prescription drugs said they were **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** (53%) or **“VERY DIFFICULT”** or **“DIFFICULT”** (47%) to obtain (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Some youth report that obtaining prescription drugs illegally is easy, while others report it is difficult

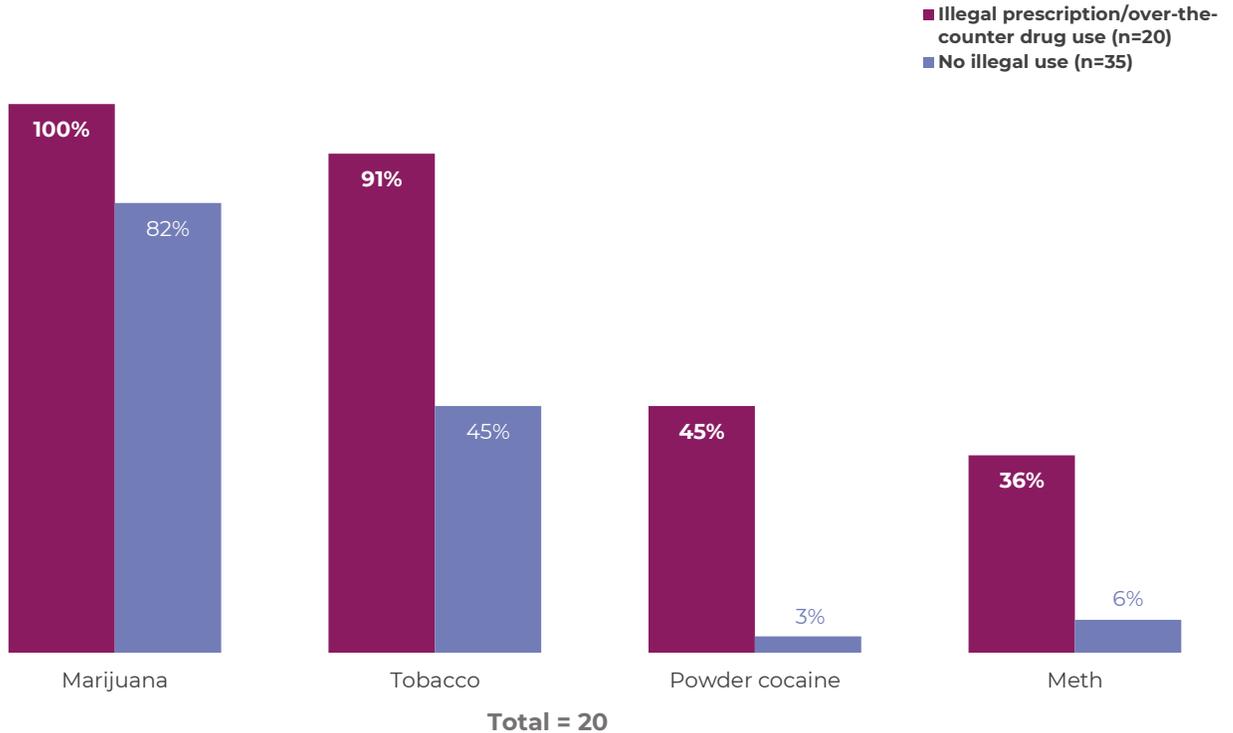


*Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.
Source: SANDAG, 2022*

When asked how they got the prescription drugs, the most common response was that another person gave it to them (88%), with the other person most often being a friend (64%), or acquaintance (43%). In addition, 69% said they bought it and 25% took it from someone (most often an acquaintance, 50%).

Those youth who reported abusing prescription or over-the-counter medication were significantly more likely to have tried marijuana, tobacco, powder cocaine, and meth (Figure 14).

Figure 14
Youth who abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs are significantly more likely to use other illicit drugs*



*Significant at $p < 0.05$
 Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 Source: SANDAG, 2022

Takeaway

Tranquilizers and Percocet were the most frequently abused prescription drugs. Fewer youth reported ever abusing prescription drugs in 2021, compared to 2020. Youth who abused prescription drugs had mixed opinions regarding the ease of getting these drugs.

How many of these youth have received drug treatment or feel they could use treatment now?

Around one-fourth (24%) of youth reported they had previously received drug treatment. Of those youth who had received treatment in the past, 46% had been in treatment once, 15% twice, 23% three times, and 15% four or more times. The most recent treatment experience was more likely to be court-ordered (77%) than voluntary (23%), and 82% were outpatient, 9% were inpatient, and 9% were 12-step programs like Narcotics Anonymous/Alcoholics Anonymous. Of all youth who received treatment, 46% reported that they had successfully completed it. When asked what they had ever received treatment for, 77% said marijuana, 31% said alcohol, 23% said some other substance or combination of substances, 15% said meth, and 8% said cocaine/crack. When asked if they wanted treatment now (for a drug they had ever used), only 18% said they did. Of these youth, five said they needed it for marijuana, three for alcohol, two for tobacco, and one for meth.

Figure 15

No youth were arrested for drug offenses on their current arrest, yet many have a history of drug use



Source: SANDAG, 2022

What do we know about other needs and risk factors among these youth?

Home environment

- Prior to arrest, 76% of the youth interviewed reported living in a stable residence, 22% said they lived in some type of group setting and 2% said they were homeless.
- When asked who they lived with, 71% said their mother, 31% their father, 19% said both their mother and father, and 17% said they did not live with a parent at all.
- Around three-quarters (71%) reported that they lived with at least one sibling.
- A little over two-fifths (42%) said their immediate family had some type of previous Child Welfare Services (CWS) involvement.
- One-fourth (25%) had been in foster care at some time in their life.
- Forty-eight percent (48%) of the youth reported a sibling and 57% said a parent had been previously arrested and booked into a detention facility.
- When asked whether they knew if their parents had abused alcohol or used other drugs, not including marijuana, 40% said they did. In addition, 7% said they were aware of illegal parental marijuana use.
- Just under half (49%) of the youth reported they had previously run away from home.

Mental health

- Twenty percent (20%) of the youth reported they had previously thought about killing themselves and seven of these eleven individuals had previously made a suicide attempt.
- Forty percent (40%) of the youth interviewed said they had seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavior, or mental health issues. Around one-third said they had been told by a professional they had a diagnosed issue (31%) and of those 17 youth, all 17 were prescribed medication for it.
- Forty-two percent (42%) said they had felt like their mental, emotional, or psychological health has gotten in the way of doing activities or accomplishing goals at least once in the past (65% of females and 32% of males) and 65% of those youth said they had felt this way in the past 30 days.

School/work

- Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the youth reported they had previously skipped school or been truant and of those youth, 22% were not currently enrolled in school because of an expulsion, suspension, or dropping out on their own.
- The median number of days truant in the previous month was 5.0 (range 1 to 20).
- Twenty percent (20%) had been referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB).

Home

57%
parental criminal history

49%
ran away from home

42%
previous CWS contact

40%
parental substance use

25%
foster care involvement

17%
live with no parent

Mental health

20%
have thought about suicide

School

78%
history of truancy

Other risks

35%
of females have been approached for human trafficking

16%
have overdosed

What is the criminal and other risky behavior history of these youth?

- Over four-fifths (84%) of the youth reported they had been arrested previously, 78% had been previously detained at a juvenile facility, and 80% had been under probation supervision before (93% of whom still were).
- The median number of prior arrests was 2.0 (range 1 to 30).
- Sixty-three percent (63%) of the youth reported ever participating in some type of diversion or alternative sanction program.
- When asked what type of crime they were first arrested for, 55% said a violent crime, 32% property, 16% weapons, 14% status, and 7% drugs.
- When asked if they were aware of curfew laws, 85% of the youth reported that they were and 38% said that they had been stopped by law enforcement in the past for violating curfew.
- Despite the fact that none of the youth were arrested for a drug-related offense as the highest charge on the current arrest, 36% reported they had some previous involvement in drug distribution – either selling drugs, serving as a middleman, or both. When asked what drug(s) were involved, 89% of the 19 youth said marijuana, 16% powder cocaine, 16% meth, 11% LSD, and 5% OxyContin; 32% said they sold some other drug or combination of drugs. Five percent (5%) of those ever involved in drug distribution said they had been involved in the past 30 days.
- Thirteen percent (13%) reported they had previously committed a crime to get money to buy drugs.
- Overall, 55% of the youth interviewed said they were in a gang or have hung out with gang members. When asked their current status, 41% said they are currently a member, 24% said they currently hang out (but were never a member), 21% used to hang out, 10% used to be a member, and 3% used to be a member, but currently hang out with gang members. On average, these individuals said they started hanging out with the gang when they were 10.8 (range 1 to 14) years old.
- When asked about their former association as a gang member, the nine youth who stopped hanging out with gangs reported the following reasons for stopping: five said they were tired of the lifestyle, two wanted to avoid/get out of the justice system, two said it was too dangerous, and one said they moved.
- Six of the 17 females (35%) interviewed, and two of the 38 males (5%) interviewed reported they had been approached to engage in human trafficking. When these youth were asked where the solicitation happened, two each said online, on the street, or at a friend's house, and one each said at school, a shopping center, or a group home.
- One male and one female said they had ever been involved in pimping activities, but none of the youth interviewed had reported ever engaging in prostitution.
- A quarter of the youth who were interviewed (25%) reported they had brought a weapon to school. Most frequently, the weapon brought to school was a knife (93%). When asked why they had the weapon, 64% said for protection, 58% said they forgot they had it, 14% said it was a status symbol, 14% said it was to threaten someone, and 14% said retaliation.
- Forty-four percent (44%) of those surveyed reported they had ever had a gun. When asked where they got it from, the most common responses were from a friend (48%), bought off the street (26%), from a family member (9%), that they stole it (4%), or got it

some other way (9%). When asked how easy it was to get a gun, 50% said **“VERY EASY”** and 38% said **“EASY.”**

- Six percent (6%) of youth reported they had crossed the U.S./Mexico border to drink alcohol, and the mean age of first crossing was 15.3 (range 15 to 16). In addition, 7% reported they had previously been approached to transport drugs across the border, which is an 11% decrease since last year.

Figure 16

Most youth have had prior justice contact and engaged in other illegal activities



Source: SANDAG, 2022

- When the youth were asked if they had participated in any types of risky behaviors related to substance use in the past 12 months, the most frequent behaviors they reported included riding in a car with a driver who had used alcohol/drugs, losing their memory from drinking, and participating in sexual activities after using alcohol/drugs (Table 1).
- Sixteen percent (16%) of the youth reported they previously had a drug overdose. When asked what drug(s) they had overdosed on, responses included marijuana, powder cocaine, Xanax, and fentanyl laced drugs. None of the youth who had overdosed said they had ever been administered naloxone.

Table 1

Many juvenile arrestees participate in risky behaviors associated with substance use

Ride in a car with a driver who has used alcohol/drugs	46%
Not remember what happened after using alcohol/drugs	41%
Participate in sexual acts after using alcohol/drugs	40%
Get in trouble with parents for using alcohol/drugs	39%
Get sick from alcohol/drugs	39%
Go to school high/drunk	37%
Get in physical fight after using alcohol/drugs	35%
Pass out after using alcohol/drugs	28%
Feel bad about something done when drunk/high	26%
Drive a car after drinking/using drugs	26%
Miss school because of alcohol/drugs	20%
Have alcohol-/drug-related health problems	8%
Total	52-54

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2022