

SANDAG

CJBRIEF

Research findings from
the Criminal Justice
Clearinghouse

2023 Methamphetamine Use by San Diego County Arrestees

Data from the SANDAG Substance Abuse Monitoring program

October 2024

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Study Background

This SANDAG CJ Brief, 2023 Methamphetamine Use by San Diego County Arrestees, is part of a series of reports highlighting findings from the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of this program, adults and juveniles booked into local jails are approached within 48 hours of their arrest (and booking) to participate in an interview regarding their drug use and other recent behaviors. Because the number of youths booked into East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility has decreased considerably in recent years, youth on probation were also interviewed at the San Diego Achievement Centers.

Acknowledgements

This effort would not be possible without funding from the SANDAG Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and the generous support from the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services, and the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA). Their support—as well as the cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, Probation Department, and the San Diego Achievement Centers—is gratefully acknowledged. To learn more about the SAM program and to access other current reports, visit [SANDAG.org/cj](https://www.sandag.org/cj).

Introduction

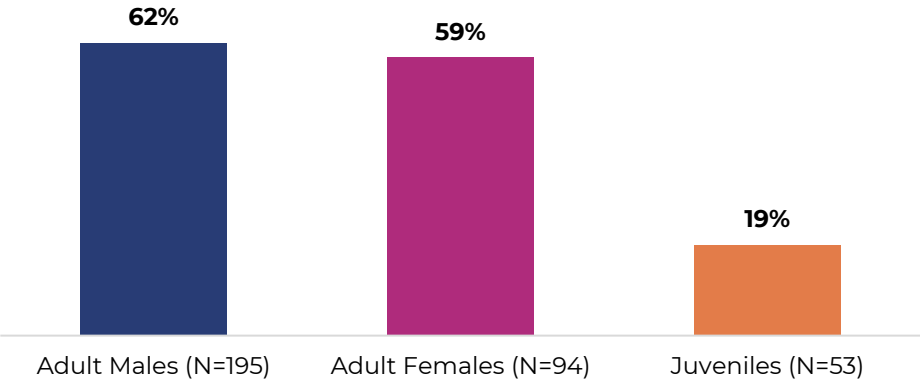
Since 1987, as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program, SANDAG has conducted interviews with randomly selected adults and juveniles booked into San Diego County jails to gather data on drug use histories and involvement in other risky or illegal behaviors. In 2023, a total of 291 adults at the Central Jail, Vista Detention Facility, and Las Colinas Detention and Reentry Facility completed an interview and provided a valid urine sample for analysis. Additionally, 54 juveniles were interviewed at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility and San Diego Achievement Centers.

Overall Meth Use

In 2023, about three in five (61%) of all interviewed adults reported ever using methamphetamine (meth), representing 62% of male adults and 59% of female adults (Figure 1). Since 2015, the percentage of respondents reporting prior meth use has ranged from 61% to 70%, with peak levels recorded in 2016 and 2019 (not shown). Historically, the proportion of juveniles reporting meth use has been considerably lower than that of adults. In 2023, about one in five (19%) interviewed juveniles reported ever trying meth.¹

“...it’s getting harder to break away from it because of the fentanyl factor”
- 57 year old male

Figure 1: Percentage of adults and juveniles that reported ever using meth



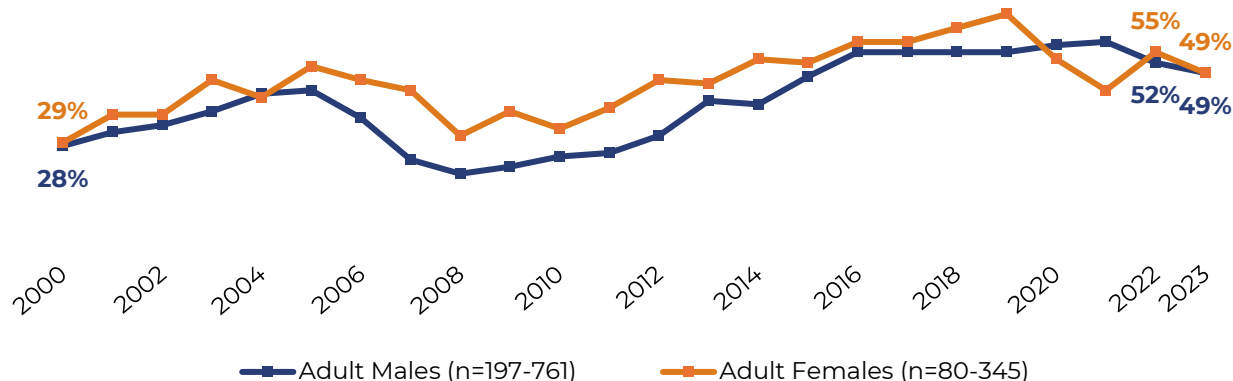
Source: SANDAG, 2023

An important component of the SAM project involves voluntary drug testing. For the first time since this study started tracking meth use, the positive rate for females was exactly the same as that of males (49%)—both showing a decrease from 2022 (Figure 2). Juveniles were excluded from this year-over-year comparison as no urine sample data was collected.²

¹ Juvenile data is not shown by gender due to its small sample size.

² Due to COVID-19 protocols and a shift in intake procedures at the East Mesa Detention Facility, it became unfeasible to conduct drug testing for juveniles beginning in 2022 and continuing into 2023.

Figure 2: Percentage of positive tests for meth by gender (2000-2023)



Source: SANDAG, 2023

Meth Addendum Findings

Given that meth has consistently been one of the most commonly used illicit drugs by individuals booked into San Diego County jails, those who report using it within the last 30 days are asked to complete an addendum. Of the 175 adults and 10 juveniles who reported past meth use, 113 adults (65%) reported using it in the last 30 days specifically. No juveniles reported use during this timeframe. The following sections are thus based on a sample of 102 adults who successfully completed the addendum (68% males and 32% females) and summarizes what they shared during their interviews.

Respondent Perceptions of Meth’s Market Dynamics

Understanding how adults who use meth perceive the availability, price, and quality of meth can offer insights into consumer behavior and can help inform efforts to reduce related harms. In 2023, among those who reported meth use in the 30 days preceding the interview, about one in three (34%) reported that meth was more available compared to the previous year and 41% reported that the price was lower (Figure 3). Nearly two in three (64%) noted that the quality of meth was worse from the year prior—the highest rate since 2007 (not shown).

Figure 3: Respondent perceptions of meth availability, pricing, and quality in 2023 compared to 2022



Source: SANDAG, 2023

Meth Purchase and Usage Patterns

Despite efforts to decrease meth use and its availability, the Drug Enforcement Administration reports that meth continues to be available with high purity and potency in the United States.³ To further probe the availability of meth, respondents were asked a series of questions to describe how they typically get the drug, their daily and monthly usage, and their usual consumption methods.

“It’s very addictive and people who don’t do meth don’t realize how bad it is.”

- 31 year old female

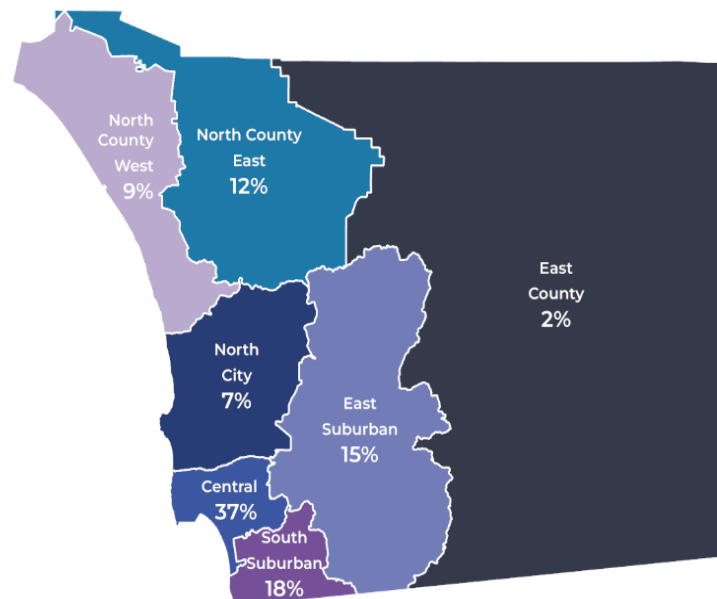
Purchasing Patterns

About two in five respondents (41%) have a primary source or dealer they typically buy meth from and over half (54%) usually buy from someone else when their main source is not available. Additionally, more than three in five (62%) have purchased it from a stranger before. Of respondents that reported having a main source, 26% used them for one year and 21% for two years. About one in three respondents (32%) reported also getting other drugs from that main source.

Location of Meth Purchase

In 2023, most arrestees reported buying meth in either the central (37%), south suburban (18%), or east suburban (15%) major statistical areas (MSA) of the county (Figure 5).⁴

Figure 4: Meth purchasing patterns across San Diego County’s MSAs in 2023



Source: SANDAG, 2023

³ Drug Enforcement Administration (May 2024). 2024 National Drug Threat Assessment. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice. Available at <https://www.dea.gov/sites/default/files/2024-05/5.23.2024%20NNTA-updated.pdf>

⁴ There are seven MSAs in the San Diego region that describe different geographical areas of the County. To view these MSAs on a map, visit: <https://sdgis.sandag.org/>

Usage Patterns and Consumption Methods

When respondents were asked about their longest usage streak within a typical 30-day month, the average streak of meth use was 19 days. When asked how many times they use meth in a typical day of use, the average (mean) reported was about seven times (Figure 4). Of those who reported their daily usage of meth in measurable units, the average amount of meth consumed daily was 1.6 grams.

Figure 5: Average meth use frequency and quantity among respondents



Source: SANDAG, 2023

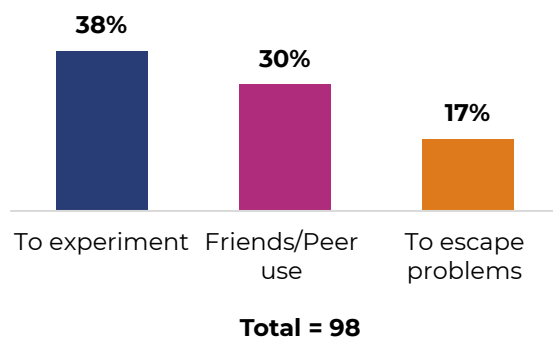
In terms of how the drug is consumed, the majority of users (77%) reported that smoking it (alone, not mixed) is their primary method of consumption. When asked about their second most common method within the last 12 months, respondents most frequently said they snort it (38%).

Motivations for Meth Use

While initial motivations for meth use were most frequently rooted in curiosity and social environments, motivations for current use are primarily driven by addiction and functional needs. When respondents were asked why they first started using meth, nearly two in five (38%) said it was a form of experimentation, while about one in three (30%) pointed to peer influence (Figure 6). When asked why they use it now, the most common reasons given were addiction (31%), and as a way to escape problems and stay awake (23% each, respectively) (Figure 7).

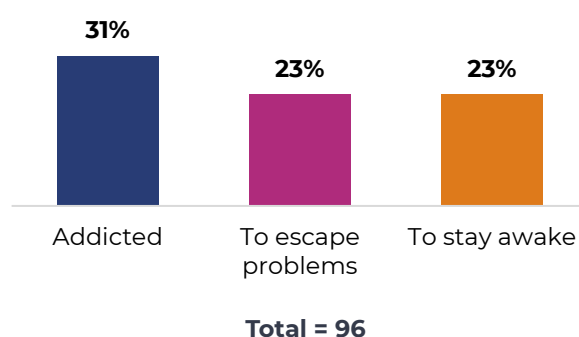
"I think it's not that bad, it helps me out to survive on the streets"
- 31 year old female

Figure 6: Top three reasons respondents began to use meth



Note: Only top three reasons are shown.
Source: SANDAG, 2023

Figure 7: Top three reasons respondents currently use meth



Note: Only top three reasons are shown.
Source: SANDAG, 2023

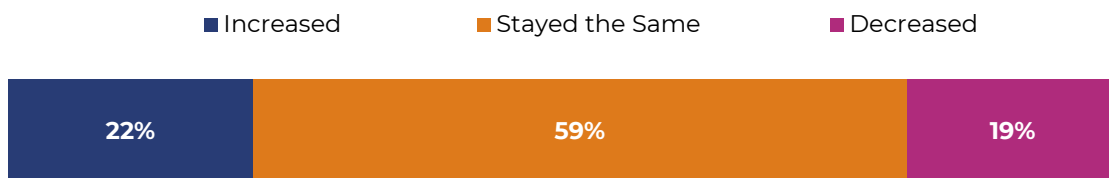
Demand for Meth

Nearly one in three (31%) respondents reported having sold meth or acted as a middleman within the last year, indicating that many users are not only consumers but are also active participants in the drug distribution network. Of those respondents who engaged in distribution, over one in five (22%) said the demand for meth had increased in 2023 compared to the previous year. However, the majority stated that demand had stayed the same (59%) (Figure 8).

“I wish I never did it. It’s destroyed my teeth.”

- 30 year old male

Figure 8: Perceptions of meth demand according to respondents who engaged in distribution



Total = 27

Source: SANDAG, 2023

Additional Risk Factors Reported

- **71%** of employed respondents reported using meth before or during work hours. The most common job sectors reported were construction, retail/merchandising, driving, and mechanic.
- **23%** of respondents have carried a weapon with them when getting meth. Of those, most (**78%**) were weapons other than guns (e.g., knife).
- Responding to questions related to sexual behavior:
 - **37%** reported having sex while high on meth “very often.”
 - **16%** engaged in a sexual practice they usually would not do if they were not high on meth.
- Only **5%** have ever cooked meth or helped someone else cook it. Of these 5 individuals, 2 had done so in the last 12 months.