

## Homelessness and Mental Illness Are Issues for Arrestees in San Diego

Recent data collected from interviews of adult arrestees in San Diego County jails (through the Substance Abuse Monitoring program (SAM)) illustrate the complex relationship between homelessness, mental illness, and the justice system. The knowledge that jails, by default, have become one of the largest institutions housing the mentally ill is not new, but these data support research in the field that they also act as a temporary shelter for the homeless. For example, one-half (50%) of the recent arrestees interviewed report at least one episode of homelessness in their lifetime, with one-quarter (25%) currently homeless. As Table 1 shows, these individuals with a history of homelessness were significantly more likely to have substance abuse issues, mental health issues, and be arrested most recently for a non-violent offense. Additionally, women, individuals 40 and over, and those identified as African-American or White were more likely to report ever being homeless.

**Figure 1**

### ARRESTEES WITH HISTORY OF HOMELESSNESS OFTEN STRUGGLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL ILLNESS\*

	Ever Homeless	Never Homeless
Tested positive for any drug	72%	51%
Tested positive for multiple drugs	30%	13%
Ever stayed overnight in a psychiatric facility	27%	8%
Ever received a mental health diagnosis	35%	12%
Prior arrest	92%	72%
Current arrest for violent offense	14%	24%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>394</b>	<b>395</b>

\*Significant at  $p < .05$ .

SOURCE: SANDAG 2007 Adult Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region, August 2008.

Another study that found a higher rate of co-occurring disorders among homeless individuals in jail, also reported a longer jail confinement associated with these individuals<sup>1</sup>. With jails and prisons increasingly in the spotlight due to rising costs and overcrowding, these findings provide support for alternative sentencing (e.g., treatment) and appropriate release planning (e.g., housing placement) for the non-violent offender struggling with personal and structural issues (i.e., homelessness). To learn more about characteristics of arrestees in San Diego County, visit the SANDAG Web site [www.sandag.org/cjc](http://www.sandag.org/cjc) for the latest 2007 SAM report.

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<sup>1</sup>McNeil, D., Binder, R., and Robinson, J.(2005) *Incarceration Associated With Homelessness, Mental Disorder, and Co-occurring Substance Abuse*. **Psychiatric Services** [On-line]. Available at <http://ps.psychiatryonline.org>.