

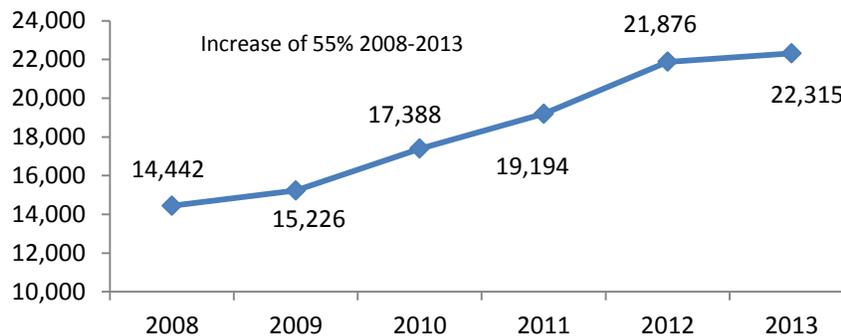
Mental Health Calls for Service to Law Enforcement Up: Possible Causes and Implications

In early 2014, SANDAG queried local law enforcement about whether their departments had seen recent increases in the number of calls for service (CFS¹) for a mental health-related issue, including attempted suicides. This effort was initiated based on anecdotal information this was a regional issue consuming a greater amount of law enforcement resources than it had in previous years. With data readily available from eleven local agencies² for calendar year 2013, it does appear that the need for law enforcement to respond to mental health crises in the community is significant, with an average of 69 CFS reported per day in 2013 (total of 25,216).

In addition, when looking at six years (2008 through 2013) of data for the region's four largest law enforcement agencies (which represented 88% of the mental health CFS in 2013), the increase over time is noteworthy, with 22,315 CFS in 2013, compared to 14,442 in 2008 (an increase of 55%). While the exact reasons for these increases are difficult to determine, possible factors include limited resources from the state and the expectation that officers and deputies respond to mental health crises; an increase in Independent Living Facilities (ILFs) in some communities, which provide housing to individuals with mental health issues, but which are not licensed and managed by the state; stressful economic conditions; and the release of non-violent offenders from detention facilities who may have mental health issues.³

Figure 1

MENTAL HEALTH-RELATED CFS TO 4 LARGEST SAN DIEGO COUNTY LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, 2008-2013



NOTE: Data provided by the San Diego, Chula Vista, and Oceanside Police Departments and the San Diego County Sheriff's Department

Because of the time, cost, and public safety risks of responding to these calls, it is clear that comprehensive regional strategies are essential to keeping our communities safe and healthy. Current efforts, such as the Psychiatric Emergency Response Team or PERT (which pairs specially trained law enforcement with licensed mental health professionals to provide clinical support to law enforcement, www.pertsandiego.org) and the County of San Diego's multi-media education and awareness campaign (www.up2sd.org), which encourages San Diegans to "speak up" (and get help) or "listen up" (and offer support to those experiencing mental health challenges), are worthwhile. As such, it is important that the dialogue on this important issue continues and we work together to ensure education and equitable and compassionate screening and treatment are readily available to address an issue that can affect us all.

¹ While the numbers of crimes and arrests are measures of the demand for law enforcement resources, another is the number of CFS that a public safety agency receives. Because CFS may or may not result in an arrest or crime report, documenting the number and type of arrest or crime provides additional insight regarding trends and issues that may not be easily identifiable in other statistics.

² These agencies included the Carlsbad, Chula Vista, Coronado, El Cajon, Escondido, La Mesa, Oceanside, National City, San Diego, and Harbor Police Departments, as well as the San Diego County Sheriff's Department.

³ Twenty-nine percent (29%) of local arrestees interviewed in San Diego County jails in 2012 as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) project reported having previously been diagnosed with a mental health or psychiatric disorder.