

Homelessness Among San Diego Arrestees

According to the annual Point-in-Time Count conducted by the San Diego County Regional Task Force on the Homeless, there were 8,506 homeless individuals across the county in 2014, 3,985 of whom were unsheltered at the time of count. While demographic information is collected as part of this effort, less is known about the numbers of individuals who enter the justice system through an arrest and booking into a local detention facility and have ever been homeless or report being homeless at the time of the arrest.

Of the 926 adults interviewed in 2013 as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM)¹ program conducted by SANDAG, 56 percent reported ever being homeless and 16 percent of the total sample said they were homeless at the time of their arrest. While the percent describing their current living situation as “unstable” is consistent with other national research (regarding the proportion that report homelessness in the year prior to incarceration),² supplemental analysis of the SAM data was conducted to determine how homeless individuals may vary from other arrestees in terms of their demographic characteristics, drug use histories, and needs in other areas. As Table 1 shows, homeless arrestees were more likely to be older, White, unemployed, have a current arrest for an “other” offense, report having visited an emergency room for a drug-related incident, have a history of prior arrest(s), and have a mental health diagnosis.

Table 1
COMPARED TO ARRESTEES WHO REPORTED MORE STABLE HOUSING,
THOSE WHO IDENTIFIED AS HOMELESS WERE MORE LIKELY TO...

- Be arrested for an “other” offense (23% vs 12%) and less likely to be arrested for a violent offense (13% vs 25%)
 - Be 40 years of age and older (47% vs 27%)
 - Identify as White (72% vs 45%)
 - Be unemployed (80% vs 51%)
 - Test positive for meth (53% vs 41%)
 - Report a history of injecting drugs (38% vs 23%)
- Report they had visited an emergency room for a drug-related incident (32% vs 24%)
 - Report a history of prior arrest(s) (93% vs 80%)
- Report having a mental health issue diagnosis (40% vs 29%)

Consistent with the work by Greenberg & Rosenheck (2008), it is possible that homelessness and incarceration may increase the risk of each other and these factors seem to be exacerbated by mental illness and substance abuse. While it is heartening to learn that the number of homeless in the region has declined over the past few years, it is important to continue to examine the pathways that lead homeless individuals to be at higher risk of entering the criminal justice system. The information gleaned from the SAM program may lend support to our regional stakeholders who have been committed over the years to providing a continuum of care for the episodic, transitional, and chronically homeless. To learn more about resources in San Diego County, call “211” or visit <http://211sandiego.org/shelter-and-homeless-services>.

¹ As part of SAM, adults and juveniles arrested and booked into local detention facilities are interviewed regarding their recent drug use and other risky behaviors.

² Greenberg, G. A. & Rosenheck, R. A. (2008). Jail incarceration, homelessness, and mental health: A national study. *Psychiatric Services*, 10, 1176.