

Heroin Use and Heroin-Related Deaths Are Up Nationally What Do We Know About Heroin Use Among Local Arrestees?

Since 2002, heroin use in the U.S. has risen along with heroin-related deaths. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC),¹ the rate of past-year heroin use jumped 63% from 1.6 (per 1,000 persons age 12 and older) in 2002 to 2.6 in 2012, while the number of heroin-related deaths quadrupled (from .7 to 2.7 deaths per 100,000). Locally, the San Diego County Medical Examiner² has seen heroin continuing to be the drug most frequently involved in unintentional deaths since 2005-2006. They also reported that heroin is the most common drug/medication in individuals between 20 and 39 years of age. In terms of treatment, the County noted that in 2013, 25% of treatment admissions were for heroin as the primary drug of choice, up from 19% in 2009.

Traditionally, heroin/opiate use has been lower among the arrestee population in San Diego, compared to other large U.S. cities. For example, in 2002 25% of adult male arrestees in Chicago tested positive for opiates, compared to 13% in New York and 5% in San Diego. However, in 2012 (the most recent year for comparison data across cities) these rates had declined to 15% in Chicago and 10% in New York but doubled to 10% in San Diego.

In 2014, **13 percent of adult male arrestees and 15 percent of adult female arrestees in San Diego County tested positive for heroin/opiates – the highest rates since the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) began tracking data in this format in 2000.** Because of these increases, SANDAG looked more closely at soon-to-be released SAM data to better understand some of the characteristics of these individuals who were interviewed (646 who were not positive for opiates and 100 who were). This information may be of interest to law enforcement professionals, as well as others who work with this population.

- **Ethnic and Gender Differences:** While there was no significant difference in opiate positive rates by age, there was by ethnicity with 20% of White arrestees testing positive, compared to 9% of Hispanics and 6% of Blacks. For gender, while the difference in positive rates was not significant, females reported using heroin significantly more days per month on average than males (15.3 versus 8.7).
- **Poly-Drug Use:** 83% of those positive for opiates were also positive for meth – compared to 55% of those not positive for opiates, a trend which may have implications for treatment. In comparison, about half (46%) of arrestees positive for opiates were also positive for marijuana and 4% were positive for cocaine – rates similar to those not positive for opiates.

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015). *Vital Signs: Demographic and Substance Use Trends Among Heroin Users – United States, 2002-2013 (Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Volume 64)*. Atlanta, GA: Author.

² County of San Diego Department of the Medical Examiner (2015). *2014 Annual Report*. San Diego, CA: Author.

- **Prior Abuse of Prescription Drugs:** 72% of arrestees positive for opiates reported they previously abused prescription drugs compared to 36% of those not positive. Over half (54%) of those positive for opiates who had abused prescription drugs said they used prescription drugs first and almost all (88%) said they began using heroin as a substitute.
- **Injecting and Sharing Needles/"Works":** 63% of those who said they had used heroin reported injecting it; and of these, 81% said they had injected in the past year. 43% of those positive for opiates who reported injecting also reported that they shared their needles and "works" – a reminder for the need for ongoing public health education, as well as the need for continued safety precautions in the field.
- **Homelessness and Unemployment:** Research has shown the importance of stable housing and employment for individuals trying to reestablish themselves after incarceration. Arrestees who tested positive for opiates were more likely to report ever having been homeless (73% versus 58%) and were also more likely to report being unemployed and looking for work (69% versus 56%).
- **Health Insurance and Medical Needs:** Interestingly, arrestees positive for opiates were more likely to report having health insurance than those not positive (71% versus 48%). However, they were also significantly more likely to report they had ever overdosed (51% versus 13%) and had ever had to visit an emergency room for a drug-related reason (44% versus 24%).
- **Mental Health Needs:** Over the past several years, mental health-related calls received by law enforcement have increased. Those positive for opiates were more likely to report they had a mental health diagnosis for some type of disorder (39% versus 28%) and also that they had previously thought about killing themselves (43% versus 25%).
- **Transporting Drugs Across the Border:** 24% of those positive for opiates said they had been approached to transport drugs across the border from Mexico, compared to 13% of those who weren't positive.