

May 2021

Since 1949, May has been recognized nationally as Mental Health Month, with the 2021 theme being “Hope for Change”.¹ Over the past year, the pandemic and stay-home order has led to more people than ever facing mental health challenges, with some groups at particularly high risk. These groups include those who lost a loved one to COVID-19, younger individuals, communities of color, females with children, and essential workers, as well as those with one or more risk factors including poor social supports, financial difficulties, food or housing instability, and pre-existing mental health or medical conditions.^{2,3} In July 2020, SANDAG released an InfoBits [report](#) examining how mental health calls for service (CFS) increased in the months following the stay-home order in March 2020. This new report updates these numbers through the end of calendar year 2020, presents new data about the effect of COVID-19 on individuals booked into jails locally, highlights current and new public safety partnerships to address mental health needs, and offers some takeaways for consideration.

Number of Mental Health Calls for Service to Law Enforcement in 2020

As Figure 1 shows, there were 38,497 mental health CFS to law enforcement in the San Diego region in 2020, which represented a 1.6% increase from 2019 and a 3.9% increase from 2016. This equates to an average of 105 per day. In terms of variation from month-to-month in 2020, there were fewest number reported regionally in November (2,978) and the greatest number in October (3,456) (Figure 2, next page).

Did you Know?



105 per day

San Diego County law enforcement received an average of 105 mental health CFS per day in 2020

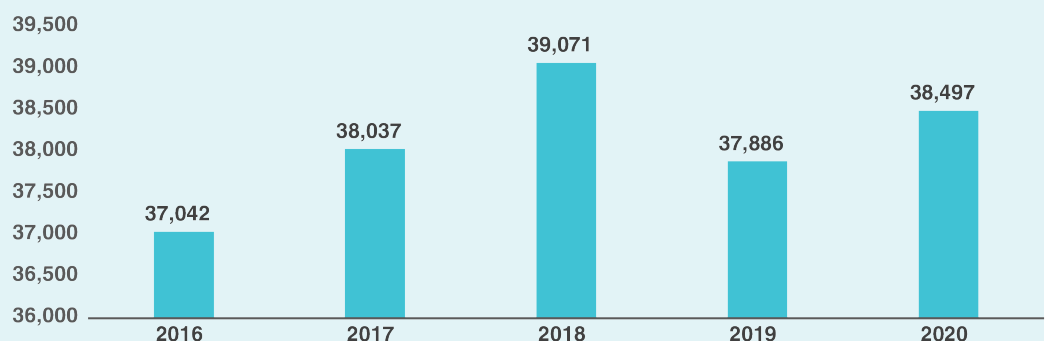
35% of individuals booked into local jails in 2020 and interviewed by SANDAG reported their mental health was negatively impacted with the pandemic and stay-home order and 41% reported their substance use had increased.



20,000

In 2020, Psychiatric Emergency Response Team (PERT) clinicians responded to over 20,000 calls to provide crisis intervention to individuals considered to be a danger to self or others, and/or gravely disabled.

Figure 1: Number of Mental Health Calls for Service to Local Law Enforcement in the San Diego Region, 2016-2020



¹ For additional information about Mental Health Month in San Diego County, please visit https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/bhs/mimhm_resources.html

² Gordon, J. (2021, April). One Year In: COVID-19 and Mental Health. Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health. Available online: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/director/messages/2021/one-year-in-covid-19-and-mental-health.shtml>

³ Abbott, A. (2021, February). COVID's Mental-Health Toll: How Scientists are Tracking a Surge in Depression. Nature, 590, 194-95. Available online: <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00175-z>

How COVID-19 and the Stay-Home Order Affected Individuals Booked into Local Jails in 2020

As part of the SANDAG Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program, individuals arrested and booked into local detention facilities are asked to voluntarily participate in a confidential and anonymous interview. In 2020, a new COVID-19 addendum was added to the interview with questions regarding how the pandemic and stay-home order affected their employment, mental health, substance use, and ability to receive services. As Figure 3 shows, just over half said that the pandemic/stay-home order had a negative impact on their employment or the employment of someone in their household, 35% a negative impact on their mental health, 41% increased their substance use, and 22% had more challenges accessing social services. Those individuals who reported that their employment status or the employment status of someone in their home had been negatively impacted by COVID-19 were significantly more likely to report mental health symptoms (43%), compared to those who had not had experienced a negative change in their employment status (27%). This finding is consistent with other research on the general population which shows that job loss can be associated with increased depression and anxiety and may lead to higher rates of substance abuse (not shown).⁴

Figure 2: Number of Mental Health Calls for Service to Local Law Enforcement by Month in the San Diego Region, 2020

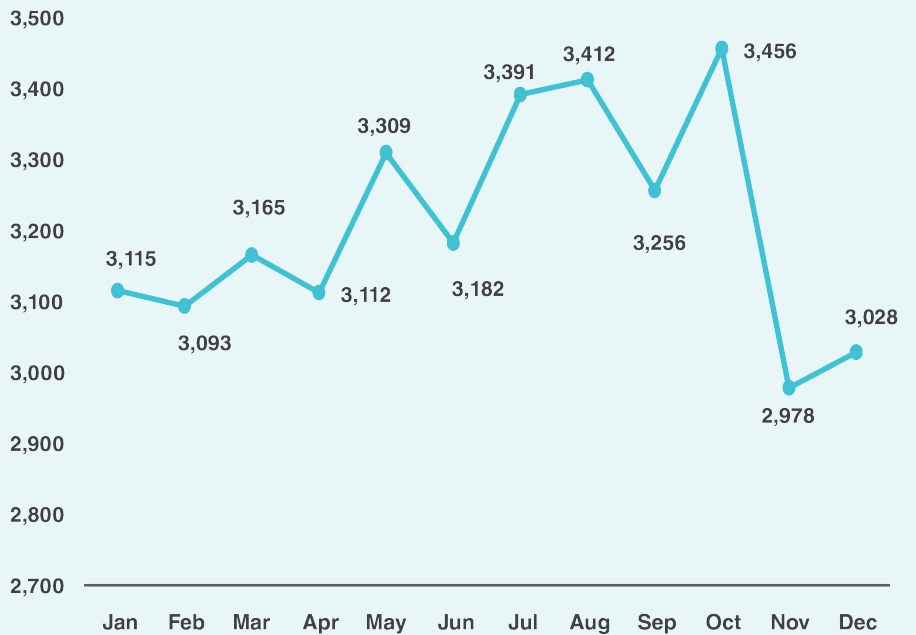
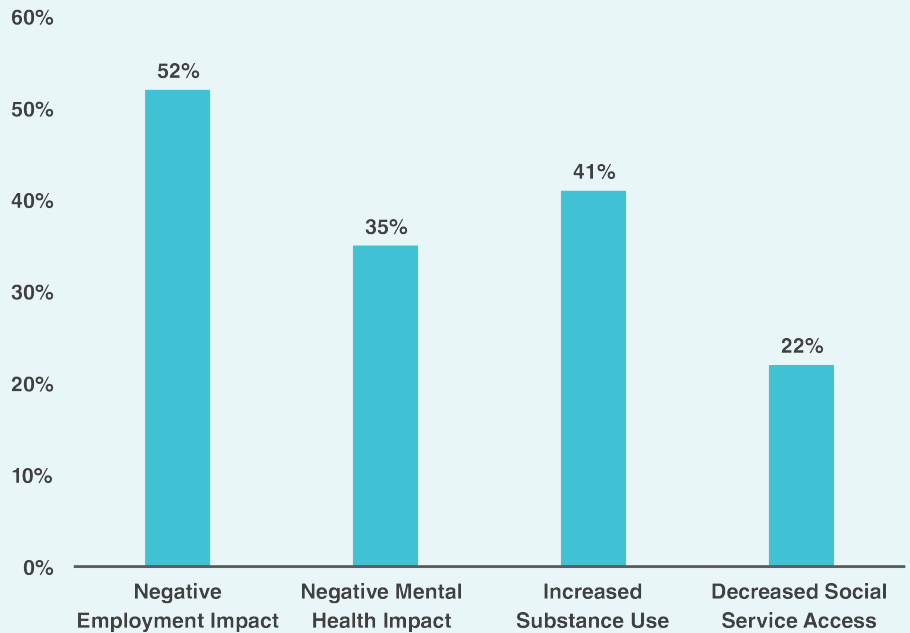


Figure 3: Self-Reported Effect of COVID-19 and the Stay-Home Order on San Diego County Justice-Involved Individuals



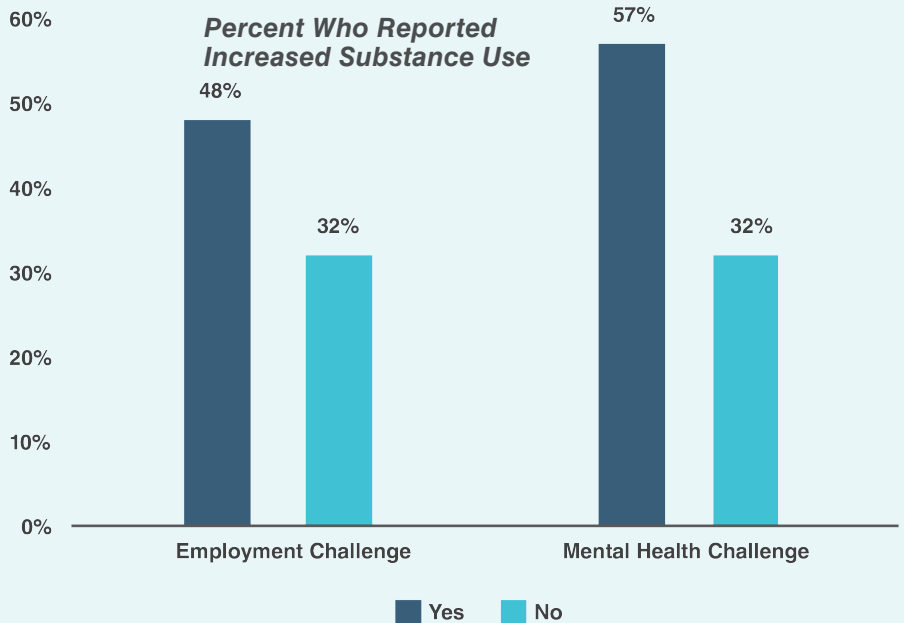
⁴ Panchal, N., Kamal, R., Cox, C., & Garfield, R. (2021, February). *The Implications of COVID-19 for Mental Health and Substance Use*. San Francisco, CA: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Available online: <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/the-implications-of-covid-19-for-mental-health-and-substance-use/>

Further analyses revealed that those who reported they had suffered negative economic impacts and stay-home-related mental health issues were both more likely to report increased substance use (48% and 57% versus 32% and 32%), compared to those who had not had to face economic and mental health issues (Figure 4). The most common substances individuals reported had increased in use included alcohol (50%), meth (48%), marijuana (46%), and heroin (16%) (not shown). This finding is consistent with previous cited publications that substance use has also increased among the general population and that individuals, including those with existing mental health issues, may be using substances to self-medicate and alleviate the stress they may be feeling, demonstrating the importance of addressing all issues in a holistic manner.

Efforts to Best Address Mental Health Calls for Service in the San Diego Region

As described in the earlier InfoBits report on this topic, San Diego County has a history of public safety and mental health clinicians working together collaboratively. This includes PERT, which marks its 25th anniversary in 2021, and involves the pairing of a behavioral health clinician with a law enforcement officer to assist community members having a behavioral health crisis. Since June 1, 1996, when one clinician was first paired with an officer from the San Diego Police Department, PERT has grown to providing 70 licensed behavioral

Figure 4: Percent of Individuals Who Reported Increased Substance Use by Whether They Experienced an Employment or Mental Health Challenge



health clinicians to law enforcement across the region, as well as 2 to the San Diego Fire and Rescue Resource Access Program through a pilot program focusing on the highest utilizers of the City of San Diego's 911 EMS system. In 2020, PERT clinicians received 20,098 service calls (average of 55 per day) to provide crisis intervention

for individuals considered to be a danger to self or others, and/or are gravely disabled. Additionally, PERT clinicians conducted 24,689 community service contacts (average of 67 per day) that included follow-up conversations, providing referral resources to family members, and consultations with service providers.⁵

In 2020

PERT clinicians:

- received **20,098** service calls
- conducted **24,689** community service contacts

⁵ More information about PERT can be found at <http://www.comresearch.org/pert.php>

In addition, the County of San Diego began piloting a new program in North County coastal communities in January 2021 for individuals who need assistance with behavioral health crises that do not require law enforcement intervention. This new program, the Mobile Crisis Response Teams,⁶ provides crisis intervention, triage, and assessment services in the field to connect

people to additional care when needed to prevent acute psychiatric crises from escalating. This program supplements other efforts undertaken by the San Diego County District Attorney's Office in recent years, including the establishment of the County's first formal pre-trial mental health diversion program in 2020 and regional de-escalation training for law enforcement in 2019.

Takeaways:

These takeaways are offered based on the data presented here, research on best-practices, and the input of local law enforcement who were surveyed for this report.

- Regional efforts and collaborations to best meet the mental health needs of our community in ways that offer a continuum of care are encouraged. This includes continuing to expand training for law enforcement first responders and utilizing mental health clinicians, rather than sworn officers, to respond when it is determined safe to do so. It could also include giving schools the ability to handle non-violent psychological crises with students without having to call law enforcement, expanding service availability across the region, and identifying clients who have mental health issues, but are released after temporary holds without being stabilized, for other ways they can be assisted to stop a cycle of call and release.
- Given that helping people address their basic needs can also alleviate psychiatric symptoms, ensuring this is included in local plans is encouraged, especially for communities of color who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and individuals who are homeless or experiencing housing instability.
- Continue to identify and address barriers to being able to access mental health services, including stigma, cost, and access.
- Continue to expand information sharing to the extent possible given privacy concerns, to ensure the safety of all.



About infobits

SANDAG serves as the region's clearinghouse for information and data. InfoBits publish timely, relevant information informing the public while providing context on complex issues facing the region.

sandag.org

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⁶ <https://www.countynewscenter.com/county-officials-highlight-early-success-of-mobile-crisis-response-team-program/>