2020 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

SEPTEMBER 2021

Research findings from the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse
Highlights

Three in five juveniles positive for at least one drug

Three in every five (60%) youth interviewed in 2020 tested positive for at least one substance, the second highest rate since 2000. In addition, two-thirds (67%) of the youth reported having tried all three gateway drugs (alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana). The mean age of first use was around 12.

Substance use is associated with other risky behaviors

Half or more of the youth interviewed reported riding in a car with a driver who had used alcohol or other drugs, getting in a physical fight after using alcohol/drugs, and going to school high or drunk.

Marijuana use up and perceived risk down

Marijuana remained the drug of choice for youth interviewed, with 56% positive at the time of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) interview. Only 20% of youth who had used marijuana thought marijuana could be harmful to someone who used it and 100% said it was “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain.

Juveniles who are detained have underlying risk issues

Over half (54%) of the youth interviewed reported previously running away from home, 48% that their family had prior contact with Child Welfare Services (CWS), and 44% had been in foster care.

Majority of youth have vaped

Just over four-fifths (84%) of the youth interviewed reported ever vaping, most often flavored nicotine (83%) or marijuana/THC (74%). Two-thirds (67%) reported vaping at school and 52% thought that vaping was not harmful.
Background

When the juvenile component of the nationally-funded ADAM (Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring) program was discontinued in 2003 (one year before the entire program ended), local funding was secured, which enabled this important data collection effort to continue in the region as the San Diego County SAM program.

SAM (and ADAM when it was in existence) is unique in that while most data tracking drug-use trends over time rely solely on self-report, SAM includes an objective measure of recent drug use over time with the analysis of a voluntary urine sample that is confidential and anonymous.

In 2020, San Diego County SAM was supported by the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) and the County of San Diego. Their support, as well as funding from SANDAG member agencies through the Criminal Justice (CJ) Clearinghouse and the cooperation of the San Diego County Probation Department, is gratefully acknowledged.

This CJ Bulletin, 2020 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region, is the second in a four-part series presenting SAM data collected (from both juveniles and adults) in the 2020 calendar year. As part of this study, 51 youth were interviewed at Juvenile Hall (March) or virtually (September) in 2020. While the first part of the study was conducted prior to stay-home orders being put into place, the second half required pivoting to online interviews to ensure the health and safety of both those being interviewed and the interviewers. This change, as well as new policies that promoted alternatives to detention that limited who can be booked into Juvenile Hall (screened felony-level offenses and some case-by-case exceptions) should be considered when reviewing these results and how they may be different from prior years.

Ninety-eight percent (98%) or 50 of these youth, provided a urine sample for drug testing purposes (37 males and 13 females). This research bulletin includes the results of urinalysis trends over time, as well as information pertaining to lifetime and recent self-reported drug use, perceived risk and availability of different drugs, characteristics of the youth interviewed, and how these factors may be related to drug use. In addition, all of the data (percentages and raw numbers) captured through the juvenile interviews and urinalyses for the past five years (2016–2020) are available online at sandag.org/cj. For questions regarding the project methodology or data set, please contact the SANDAG Criminal Justice Research Division at (619) 699-1900.

What information is collected through these interviews?

- Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 5)
- Urinalysis result trends over time (page 9)
- Perceptions of how harmful drugs are and how easy they are to get (page 10)
- Illicit use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs (page 12)
- Previous drug treatment and perception of current need for treatment (page 14)
- Risk factors including home environment, mental health, and school attendance (page 15)
- Criminal and other risk behavior (page 16)
How many youth interviewed at Juvenile Hall had ever tried illicit substances?

In 2020, almost all (96%) of the youth interviewed reported ever trying an illicit substance, which includes alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine (meth), and ecstasy. The majority of youth also reported recent use of at least one of these substances – 90% in the last year and 82% in the last 30 days (Figure 1).

Of the youth who reported ever trying one of these substances, the average (mean) number tried was 3.4 (range 1 to 7).

Figure 1
Almost all juveniles interviewed reported previous substance use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last 30 days</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last year</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total = 50

Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway

Almost all youth interviewed at Juvenile Hall reported prior experimentation with illicit substances, over four-fifths had used substances in the past 30 days, and the average number ever tried was 3.4.
What is the pattern of initiating substance use among youth interviewed?

Alcohol (94%) and marijuana (88%) were the most frequently tried substances, followed by tobacco (68%). Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the youth also reported binge drinking alcohol (defined as 5 or more drinks on one occasion for males and 4 for females) (Figure 2).

In addition to the substances shown in Figure 2, 10% of the youth reported trying spice (a mix of herbs and synthetic chemicals sometimes referred to as synthetic marijuana), 10% inhalants, 10% PCP, and 8% GHB.

Figure 2
Marijuana and alcohol among substances most often tried by youth

Source: SANDAG, 2021
For many of these youth, marijuana use started first, around the age of 11.6, followed by alcohol at 12.0, and tobacco at 12.3, on average. Binge alcohol use, on average, appeared to start around one year after initial alcohol use (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**
Marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco use starts around or before age of 12, on average

![Graph showing the average age of use for different substances](image)

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

In terms of recent use for the gateway drugs, 80% of those who had ever tried marijuana reported using it in the past 30 days, as did 64% of those who had ever tried alcohol and 53% of those who had ever tried tobacco (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**
Four in five youth who have tried marijuana report using it in the past 30 days

![Graph showing recent use percentages for different substances](image)

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

While roughly equal percentages of youth reported having ever tried alcohol and marijuana, those who had tried marijuana were more likely to have used it in the past 30 days and to also use it more frequently (18.6 days on average), compared to alcohol (8.1 days on average).
In 2007, when the question was first asked, slightly more youth reported that alcohol was the first substance they had ever tried (39%), compared to marijuana (34%). In 2020, almost half (46%) of youth who had tried any substances reported that marijuana was the first, followed by 38% reporting it was alcohol (Figure 5). Around two-thirds (67%) of the youth interviewed reported they had tried all three gateway drugs – alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana – not just one (6%) or two (27%).

Figure 5
Marijuana and alcohol first substances used by most youth in 2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Alcohol</th>
<th>Tobacco</th>
<th>Marijuana</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007 (n=157)</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019 (n=95)</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020 (n=48)</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

In another series of questions, youth were asked about their history and perception of vaping.

- Over four-fifths (84%) of the youth said they had ever vaped, and over two-thirds (69%) of those who had ever vaped reported vaping in the past 30 days. Of those who vaped in the past 30 days, the mean number of days vaped was 14.8 (range 1 to 30).
- When asked what substances they had vaped, the most common responses were flavored nicotine (83%) and marijuana/THC (74%). In addition, 29% reported vaping non-flavored nicotine.
- Around two-thirds (67%) reported vaping at school.
- Almost four-fifths (79%) said they preferred vaping to smoking cigarettes.
- When asked how bad they thought vaping was, 52% said “NOT AT ALL” or “ONLY A LITTLE BIT”. In addition, 40% said they thought vaping was less harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- Around one in four (26%) said they had ever gotten sick from vaping.
How many youth interviewed at Juvenile Hall tested positive for an illicit substance?

Sixty percent (60%) of juveniles interviewed in 2020 tested positive for an illicit substance – marijuana, meth, cocaine/crack, PCP, and/or opiates – a slight decrease from the 62% reported in 2019 when it was at its highest. The most common substance juveniles test positive for every year is marijuana, with 56% positive in 2020. This was also a slight decrease from 2019 when it was 57% and represents the second highest positive rate in the past 21 years. Meth is the second most commonly used illicit drug by juveniles, with 8% positive in 2020, down from 11% in 2019 (Figure 6).

Figure 6
Around 3 in 5 juveniles positive for at least one drug in 2020

For the other drugs, 2% of the youth tested positive for cocaine/crack (down from 5% in 2019), 2% for opiates (none were positive in 2019) and none for PCP (the same as in 2019). In 2020, 8% tested positive for multiple illicit drugs. Of the four youth positive for multiple substances, two tested positive for marijuana and meth, one for marijuana and cocaine, and one for meth and opiates.

Takeaway

Three in five youth interviewed in 2020 were positive for at least one drug, with 56% positive for marijuana, the second highest rates in the past 21 years.
How bad do youth think drugs are for them and how easy do they think they are to get?

When asked how bad they thought different drugs were for them (on a four-point scale), there was less perceived harm than in previous years, with four-fifths or more of youth perceiving only four drugs (spice, crack, meth, and heroin) as being “EXTREMELY BAD” or “VERY BAD”. Marijuana was considered to be the least harmful of all the drugs, with only 20% of youth reporting that using it would be “EXTREMELY BAD” or “VERY BAD” for the user. Hallucinogens, GHB, and LSD were perceived as being less harmful than tobacco (Figure 7).

Figure 7
1 in 5 youth feel that marijuana would be harmful to users

![Bar chart showing the percentage of youth who believe different drugs are harmful](chart.png)

- Marijuana: 20%
- Alcohol: 36%
- Hallucinogens: 58%
- GHB: 67%
- LSD: 67%
- Tobacco: 68%
- Powder cocaine: 74%
- Ecstasy: 75%
- OxyContin: 75%
- Inhalants: 76%
- Spice: 84%
- Crack: 85%
- Meth: 86%
- Heroin: 94%

Total = 42–50

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021
For some drugs, perception of harm also differed significantly by whether a youth had previously used the drug, including cocaine, OxyContin, hallucinogens, and marijuana. That is, those who had ever tried a drug were less likely to perceive it was harmful, compared to those who had not (Figure 8).

Figure 8
Drug users perceive substances as less harmful than those who never used*

![Graph showing perception of harm by drug and whether previously used](image)

*Significant at p <0.05
Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

According to the youth, marijuana (100%), tobacco (93%), and meth (80%) were most likely to be described as “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain (Figure 9).

Figure 9
100% of youth say marijuana is “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain

![Graph showing ease of obtaining drugs](image)

When youth who had ever used alcohol were asked how they most recently obtained it, the most common responses included they took it from a store (29%), they had someone else buy it for them (21%), they took it from someone else’s home (14%), someone 21 years or older gave it to them (14%), someone under 21 gave it to them (10%), they bought it (7%), or they took it from their own home (5%).

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway
Youth interviewed in 2020 perceive marijuana, alcohol, and hallucinogens to be the least harmful of substances and reported that marijuana, tobacco, and meth were easiest to obtain.
How many youth are using prescription drugs\(^1\) illegally?

Over half (54\%) of youth interviewed reported ever using prescription and/or over-the-counter medication illegally (Figure 10).

Figure 10
Over half of juveniles interviewed have illegally used prescription or over-the-counter drugs

The most commonly abused prescription drug type was tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rohypnol/Roachas) (74\%), followed by Percocet (44\%), codeine (41\%), fentanyl (30\%), OxyContin (27\%), morphine (19\%), methadone (15\%), Vicodin (15\%), barbiturates (15\%), and amphetamines (11\%) (Figure 11).

Other prescription drugs abused by less than 10\% of the sample (and not shown in Figure 11) included Dilaudid (8\%), tramadol (7\%), somas (7\%), suboxone (4\%), Darvon (4\%), and anti-depressants (4\%). The percent of youth combined who reported ever abusing one of the prescription painkillers was 78\%. In terms of over-the-counter drugs, all of the five who had described abusing Coricidin and four of the five described abusing liquid cold medicines.

Figure 11
Tranquilizers, Percocet, and other painkillers among most abused prescription drugs by youth

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

\(^1\) Prescription painkillers include methadone, Suboxone, Dilaudid, Percocet, Vicodin, Demerol, fentanyl, morphine, OxyContin, tramadol, and Darvon.
Over half (56%) of the youth who had abused prescription drugs said they were “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain (Figure 12).

Figure 12
Over half of youth obtaining prescription drugs illegally said it was “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to get

When asked how they got the prescription drugs, the most common response was that another person gave it to them (81%), with the other person most often a friend (86%) or acquaintance (52%).

In addition, 58% said they bought it, 38% took it from someone (most an acquaintance, friend, or family member), and 27% stole it from a pharmacy.

Those youth who reported abusing prescription or over-the-counter medication were significantly more likely to have tried the gateway drugs, as well as other substances, including powder cocaine, meth, ecstasy, hallucinogens, and crack (Figure 13).

Figure 13
Youth who abuse prescription and over-the-counter drugs more likely to use other illicit drugs*

*Significant at p <0.05
Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway
Over half of the youth interviewed say prescription drugs are “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain. Tranquilizers and Percocet were the most frequently abused prescription drugs. Those who had abused prescription drugs were also more likely to have abused street drugs.
How many of these youth have received drug treatment or feel they could use treatment now?

Around one-third (31%) of youth reported they had previously received drug treatment. Of those youth who had received treatment in the past, 36% had been in treatment once, 43% twice, and 21% three or more times. The most recent treatment experience was more likely to be court-ordered (67%) than voluntary (33%), and it was inpatient for 27%, outpatient for 60%, Narcotics Anonymous/Alcoholics Anonymous groups for 7%, and in-custody for 7%; 53% reported that they had successfully completed it. When asked what they had ever received treatment for, 80% said marijuana, 40% alcohol, 33% some other substance or combination of substances, 27% cocaine/crack, and 20% meth. When asked if they wanted treatment now (for a drug they had ever used), only 28% said they did. Of these 14 youth, 9 said they needed it for marijuana, 5 for alcohol, 4 for tobacco, 3 for powder cocaine, 3 for meth, and 1 for crack.

Figure 14
Few youth arrested for drug offenses; however, many have history of use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96%</td>
<td>have tried an illicit substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>received treatment in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60%</td>
<td>positive for an illicit substance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2%</td>
<td>arrested for a drug offense</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: SANDAG, 2021

Takeaway

Despite the fact that many of these youth had early drug use histories, only around one-third had previously received treatment, with about two-thirds of it court-ordered. Few of those interviewed felt they needed treatment for current substance use.
What other needs and risk factors do we know about these youth?

Home environment

- Prior to arrest, 70% of the youth interviewed reported living in a stable residence, but 24% said they lived in some type of group setting and 6% said they were homeless.
- When asked who they lived with, 77% said their mother, 49% their father, and 11% said they did not live with a parent at all.
- Around half (54%) reported that they lived with at least one sibling.
- Just under half (48%) said their immediate family had some type of previous Child Welfare Services (CWS) involvement.
- Over two-fifths (44%) had been in foster care at some time in their life.
- Ten percent (10%) said they were already a parent themselves.
- Thirty-five percent (35%) of the youth reported a sibling and 71% said a parent had been previously arrested and booked into a detention facility.
- When asked whether they knew if their parents had abused alcohol or used other drugs, not including marijuana, 64% said they did. In addition, 43% said they were aware of parental marijuana use.
- Just over half (54%) of the youth reported they had previously run away from home.

Mental health

- Twenty-six percent (26%) of the youth reported they had previously thought about killing themselves and 3 of these 13 individuals had previously made a suicide attempt.
- Fifty-six percent (56%) of the youth surveyed said they had seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavior, or mental health issues and around half each said they had been told by a professional they had a diagnosed issue (46%) and were prescribed a medication for it (48%).
- Forty-two percent (42%) said they ever felt like their mental, emotional, or psychological health got in the way of doing activities or accomplishing goals (62% of females and 35% of males) and about 52% said they had felt this way in the past 30 days.

School/work

- Eighty-six percent (86%) of the youth reported they had previously skipped school or been truant and 22% were not currently enrolled in school because of an expulsion, suspension, or dropping out on their own.
- The median number of days truant in the previous month was 2.0 (range 0 to 20).
- Twenty-one percent (21%) had been referred to the School Attendance Review Board.
What is the criminal and other risky behavior history of these youth?

- Over two-thirds (70%) of the youth reported they had been arrested previously, 68% had been previously detained at a juvenile facility, and 64% had been under probation supervision before (84% of whom still were).
- The median number of prior arrests was 2.0 (range 1 to 20).
- Forty percent (40%) of the youth reported ever participating in some type of diversion or alternative sanction program.
- When asked what type of crime they were first arrested for, 55% said a violent crime, 45% property, 21% weapons, 6% drugs, 6% other, and 3% status.
- When asked if they were aware of curfew laws, 84% of the youth reported that they were and 44% said that they had been stopped by law enforcement in the past for violating curfew.
- Despite the fact that few (2%) youth were arrested for a drug-related offense as the highest charge on the current arrest, 46% reported they had some previous involvement in drug distribution – either selling drugs, serving as a middleman, or both. When asked what drug(s) were involved, 96% of the 23 youth said marijuana, 57% meth, 57% powder cocaine, 17% heroin, 17% LSD, 13% crack, 9% ecstasy, and 4% OxyContin; 26% said some other drug or combination. Thirty-five percent (35%) of those ever involved said they had been involved in the past 30 days.
- Twenty-two percent (22%) reported they had previously committed a crime to get money to buy drugs.
- Overall, 54% of the youth interviewed said they were in a gang or have hung out with one. When asked their current status, 37% said they are currently a member, 37% they currently hang out (but were never a member), 11% used to be a member, and 15% used to hang out. On average, these individuals said they started hanging out with the gang when they were 11.1 (range 1 to 15) years old.
- When the seven youth who said they used to hang out with or be a member of a gang but do not now were asked what made them stop association, four said it was too dangerous, three they were tired of the lifestyle, and one each they wanted to get out of the justice system and they moved.
- Five of the 13 females interviewed (38% of the females) and none of the males reported they had been approached for human trafficking. When these youth were asked where the solicitation happened, four said on the street and one each at school, a shopping center, or a group home.
- Three females reported ever engaging in prostitution (starting at the age of 14.3); two of these individuals said they had done so in the past 30 days, both of whom wanted to stop. One male and one female said they had ever been involved in pimping.
- Over one in three (38%) youth reported they had brought a weapon to school, most often a knife. When asked why they had the weapon, 81% said for protection, 19% for status, 13% retaliation, and 6% to threaten someone.
- Forty-four percent (44%) of those surveyed reported they had ever gotten a gun, up from 21% in 2019. When asked where they got it from, the most common responses were a friend (38%), bought off the street (29%), they stole it (19%), from family (10%), and that they built it (5%). When asked how easy it was to get a gun, 57% said “VERY EASY” and 19% said “EASY.”
• Eighteen percent (18%) of youth reported they had crossed the U.S./Mexico border to obtain alcohol and/or other drugs. The mean age of first crossing was 12.4 (range 6 to 16) for alcohol and 14.4 (range 14 to 15) for other drugs. In addition, 22% reported they had previously been approached to transport drugs across the border, up from 8% last year.

• When the youth were asked if they had participated in any types of risky behaviors related to substance use in the past 12 months, around one-third or more reported they had engaged in a number of these behaviors, with the most common being riding in a car with a driver who had used alcohol/drugs, getting into a fight, and going to school high/drunk (Table 1).

• Eighteen percent (18%) of the youth reported they previously had a drug overdose, up from 9% in 2019. When asked what drug(s) they had overdosed on, responses included prescription drugs, crack, heroin, cocaine, meth, marijuana. Fifty-six percent (56%) of those who had overdosed said they had ever been administered naloxone, most of whom had received more than once.

Table 1
Many juvenile arrestees participate in risky behaviors associated with alcohol and other drug use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ride in a car with a driver who has used alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get in physical fight after using alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go to school high/drunk</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get in trouble with parents for using alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miss school because of alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get sick from alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not remember what happened while drinking</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pass out after using alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participate in sex acts after using alcohol/drugs</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel bad about something done when drunk/high</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive a car after drinking/using drugs</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have alcohol-/drug-related health problems</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 48-50

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
Source: SANDAG, 2021