

2023 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region

June 2024

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Highlights

Nearly all interviewed juveniles have tried at least one illicit substance

Ninety-one percent (91%) of youth interviewed in 2023 reported ever trying at least one illicit substance and nearly three in five (57%) reported trying all three gateway drugs (i.e., marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco).

Marijuana remains the most frequently used substance

Similar to previous years, marijuana was the most frequently tried (89%) substance and was also the substance youth reported using most recently, with 81% reporting use within the last 30 days. Marijuana was also the substance most youth (59%) reported trying first, with 100% of users describing marijuana as “VERY EASY” or “EASY” to obtain.

Nearly nine in ten youth reported ever vaping

While the proportion of interviewed youth who reported ever smoking tobacco has dropped to a six year low of 57%, nearly nine in ten (89%) youth reported ever vaping—a much higher proportion than the 76% in 2019, when the question was first asked. Flavored nicotine is consumed at a significantly higher rate (88%) than non-flavored nicotine (27%).

Prescription and over-the-counter drug use continues to increase

More than half (52%) of interviewed youth reported ever misusing prescription or over-the-counter drugs (i.e., used illegally or not as recommended), 4% more than in the previous year and 16% more than in 2021. Tranquilizers remained the most frequently illegally used prescription drugs, with 36% of youth reporting ever using. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of youth say obtaining prescription drugs illegally is “VERY EASY” or “EASY,” the highest proportion in the last five years.

Female youth at risk of sexual exploitation

More than half (53%) of female youth reported instances of being approached by someone offering to pimp or prostitute them. These solicitations most often occurred at school or online (55% respectively), with the average age of initial occurrence at 13 years old.

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, enabling SANDAG to continue this important data collection effort in the region as the San Diego County Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. In 2023, the SAM program was supported by the San Diego-Imperial High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA), Health and Human Services Agency (HHS), and the San Diego County Achievement Centers.¹ Their support, as well as funding from SANDAG member agencies through the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and the cooperation of the San Diego County Probation Department, is gratefully acknowledged.

This CJ Bulletin - 2023 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region - is the first in a four-part series presenting SAM data collected (from both juveniles and adults) in the 2023 calendar year. This bulletin includes 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.

As part of this study, a total of 54 youth were interviewed, consisting of 38 youth from East Mesa Juvenile Detention Facility and 16 youth from the San Diego Achievement Centers.²

Historically, this publication has included and discussed the results of urinalysis tests, however, due to COVID-19 protocols and intake procedures at the East Mesa Juvenile Detention facility, urine samples were not collected in the 2023 interviewing cycles for youth.³

What information is collected through these interviews?

Self-reported history of illicit drug use (page 4)

Patterns of substance use (page 5)

Perceptions of how harmful drugs are and how easy they are to get (page 8)

Illicit use of prescription and over-the-counter drugs (page 10)

Previous drug treatment and perception of current need for treatment (page 12)

Risk factors related to home environment, mental health, and school attendance (page 13)

Criminal and other risk behavior (page 14)

¹Achievement Centers were launched by the County of San Diego in FY 2020. The purpose of Achievement Centers is to offer at-risk youth and youth on probation after-school programming that provides opportunities to engage in prosocial and rehabilitation services in the community and divert them from detention.

² The inclusion of Achievement Center youth is intended to supplement the sample due to limited accessibility of these individuals. While Achievement Centers provide programming for both probation and at-risk youth from the community, for the purpose of this study, only youth under probation supervision were interviewed.

³The collection of urine samples will likely resume in the Fall of 2024 once the San Diego County Juvenile Hall re-opens. Use caution when comparing this year's sample to previous years because youth responses were historically only included if they provided a urine sample.

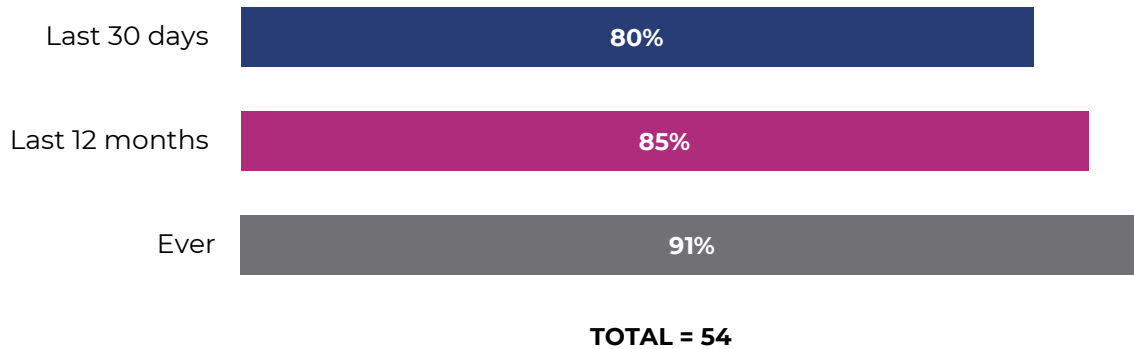
How many youth with justice system contact have ever tried illicit substances?

In 2023, almost all (91%) of the youth interviewed reported ever trying an illicit substance, including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, crack, powder cocaine, and methamphetamine (meth). The majority of youth also reported recent use of at least one of these substances – 85% in the last 12 months and 80% in the last 30 days (Figure 1). Of the youth who reported ever trying one of these substances, the average (mean) number of drugs tried was 3.2 (range 1 to 6).

What were the characteristics of the youth interviewed?

Of the 54 interviewed youth, 37 (69%) were male and 17 (31%) were female. A majority of interviewed youth were Hispanic/Latino(a) (59%), followed by White (22%), and Black/African American (19%). The average age of interviewed youth was 15.9, and most youth reported being enrolled in school (81%) at the time of the interview.

Figure 1
Previous substance use by timeframe



SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

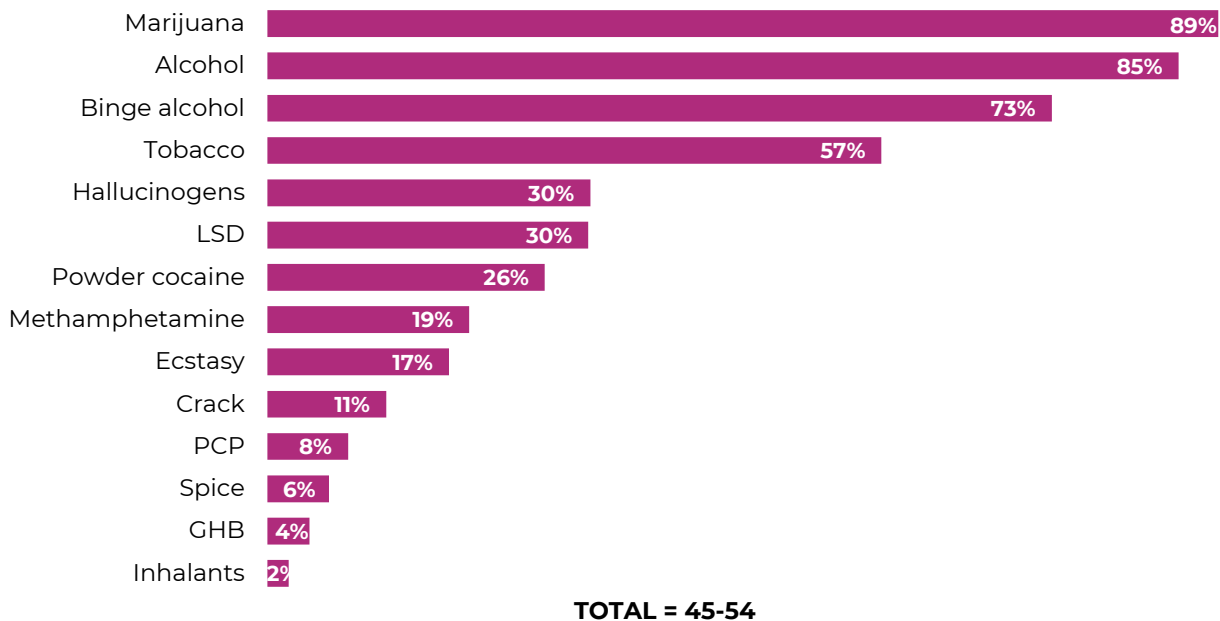
Takeaway

Almost all youth interviewed reported experimentation with illicit substances. Four in five had used substances in the past 30 days and the average number of substances ever tried was 3.2.

What were the patterns of substance use among interviewed youth?

Similar to prior years, marijuana (89%) and alcohol (85%) were the most frequently tried substances among interviewed youth, followed by tobacco (57%). Seventy-three percent (73%) of youth reported binge drinking alcohol (five or more drinks on one occasion for males and four for females) (Figure 2). Notably, nearly one in three youth (30%) had experience with hallucinogens and LSD, while around one in four had (26%) tried powder cocaine. No youth reported trying heroin.

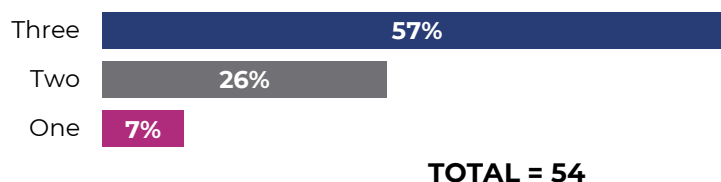
Figure 2
Rates of substance use among interviewed youth



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

The three substances considered “gateways” to further substance use for youth include alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco. It is commonly believed that the use of these substances may increase the likelihood of experimenting with more potent substances.⁴ While 9% reported never having tried any of these three gateway drugs, most youth (57%) reported having tried all three—a rate consistent with previous years.

Figure 3
Number of gateway drugs used among interviewed youth

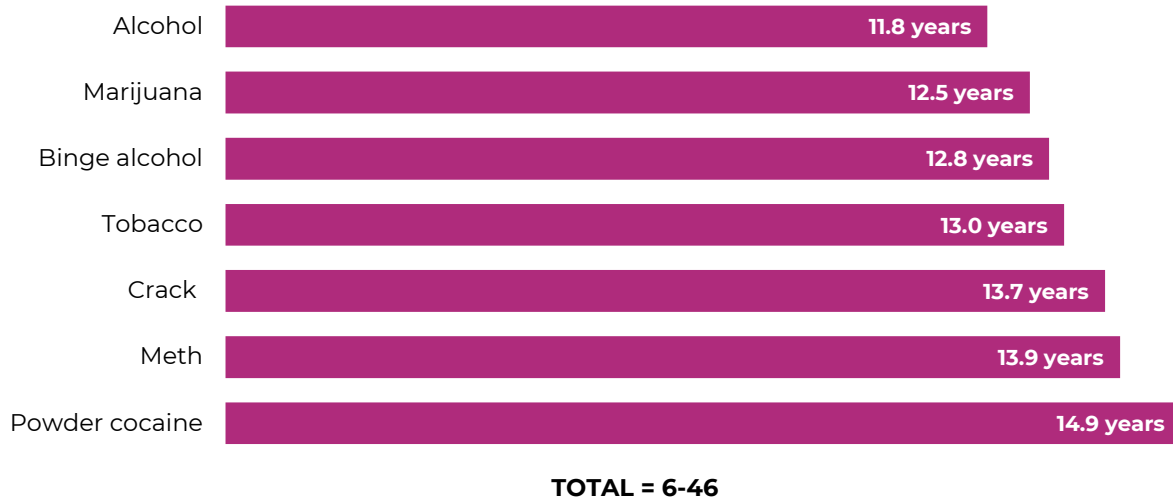


SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

⁴ DuPont, R. L., Han, B., Shea, C. L., & Madras, B. K. (2018). “Drug use among youth: National survey data support a common liability of all drug use.” *Preventive Medicine*, 113, 68–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2018.05.015>

For many of these youth, substance experimentation began at an early age, with alcohol and marijuana use beginning first, around the age of 12 (Figure 4). Binge drinking began a year after initial alcohol use, on average, and tobacco was tried soon after, at the age of 13.

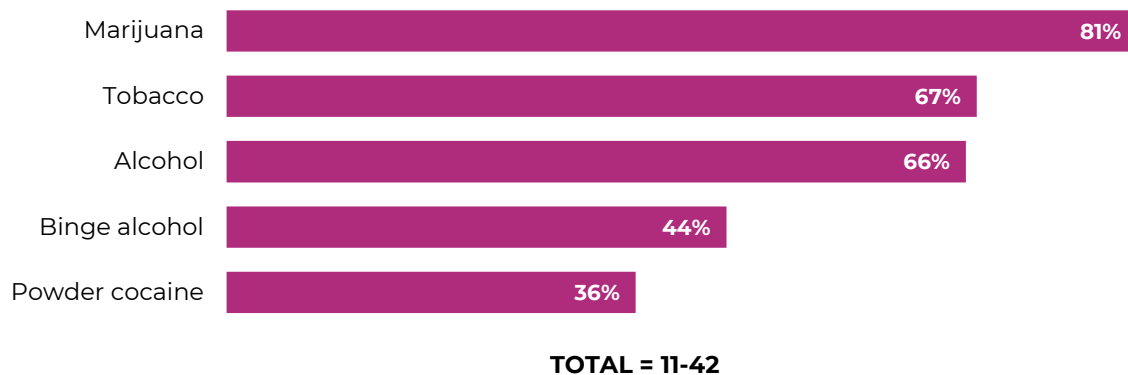
Figure 4
Average age distribution of initial substance use



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

Youth were asked about recent (i.e., past 30 days) drug use for all drugs they reported ever trying. Marijuana showed the greatest percentage of recent use, with over four in five (81%) reporting use within the past 30 days (Figure 5). The next substances most recently used were tobacco (67%) and alcohol (66%). More than one in three interviewed youth also reported recent use of powder cocaine.

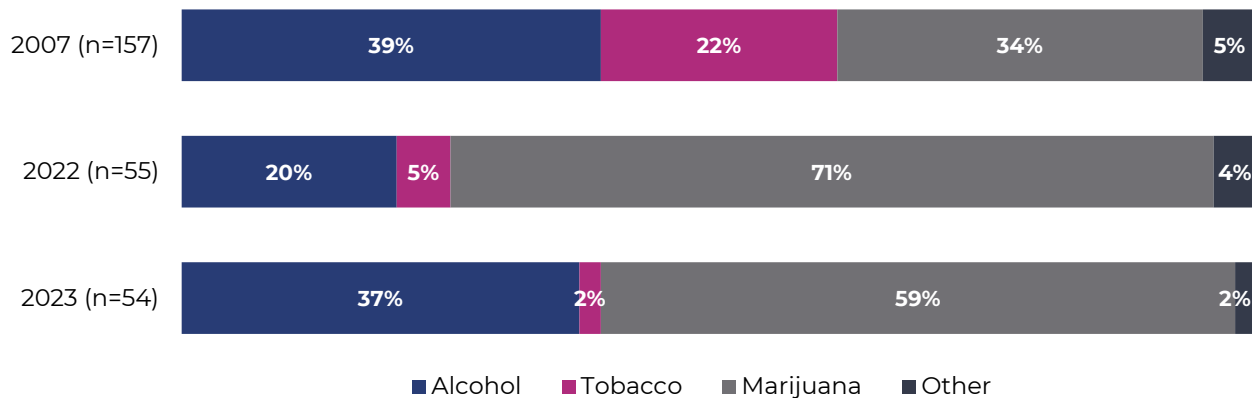
Figure 5
Most popular substances used in the past 30 days



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

When the question was first asked in 2007, slightly more youth reported that alcohol was the first substance they had ever tried (39%), compared to marijuana (34%). This trend has flipped in recent years, as marijuana has consistently shown up as the first substance tried by youth. In 2023, more youth identified alcohol as their first substance tried than in the previous year (37% compared to 20%) (Figure 6). Marijuana continued to be the most popular first substance, with more than half of youth reporting it was their first drug (59%).

Figure 6
First substance ever tried among interviewed youth



Note: Cases with missing information not included.
 SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

In 2023, only 2% of youth reported tobacco as their first substance tried (Figure 6) and the overall prevalence of tobacco use among interviewed youth has dropped to a six-year low of 52% (not shown). While these trends indicate a decline in tobacco use, the following findings suggest that youth are opting for vaping instead.

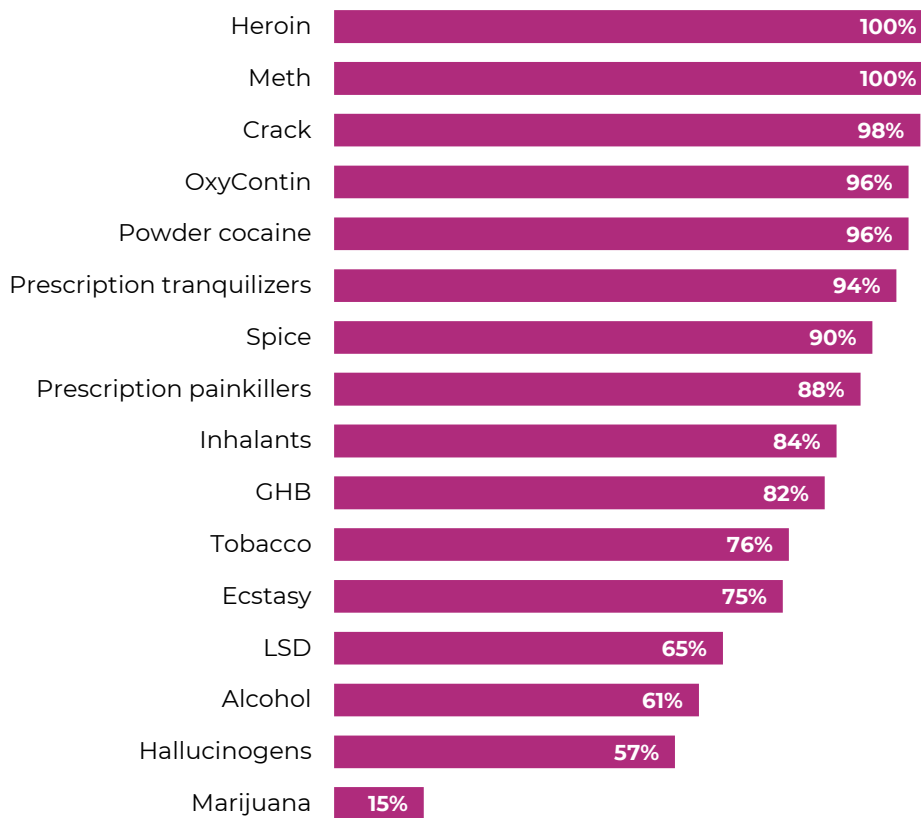
- Nearly nine in ten (89%) of the interviewed youth said they had vaped and over four-fifths (81%) of those reported vaping in the past 30 days, with an average (mean) of 14.1 days (range 1 to 30).
- Nearly eight in ten (78%) said they preferred vaping to smoking cigarettes and almost one-third (32%) thought vaping was less harmful than smoking cigarettes.
- The most common substances vaped were flavored nicotine (88%), marijuana/THC (79%), and non-flavored nicotine (27%).
- When asked how bad they thought vaping was, 55% of youth who had vaped before thought vaping was **“VERY BAD”** or **“EXTREMELY BAD”** compared to 100% of youth who had never vaped before.
- Nearly eight in ten (79%) reported vaping at school.
- More than one in four (26%) have gotten sick from vaping.

Takeaway
 Marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco remain the top three most popular substances among youth and the top three substances tried at a younger age, with marijuana continuing to be the drug most youth report trying first. Nearly nine in ten youth reported ever vaping.

What were youth’s perceptions of how harmful different substances are?

When asked how bad they thought different drugs were for them (on a four-point scale), more than half of youth perceived nearly all of the listed substances as being **“EXTREMELY BAD”** or **“VERY BAD,”** however, with the exception of marijuana which was only seen as bad by 15% (Figure 7). On the contrary, there was a strong consensus regarding the perceived dangers of heroin, meth, and crack, with all youth unanimously perceiving heroin and meth as highly harmful, followed by crack (98%). In 2023, youth perceived almost all listed substances as being more harmful than in the year prior—with the exception of crack, prescription tranquilizers, and ecstasy, whose percentages remained the same. Notably, the proportion of youth that described marijuana as being harmful more than doubled from 2022, growing from 7% to 15% (not shown).

Figure 7
Youths’ perception of drug harm

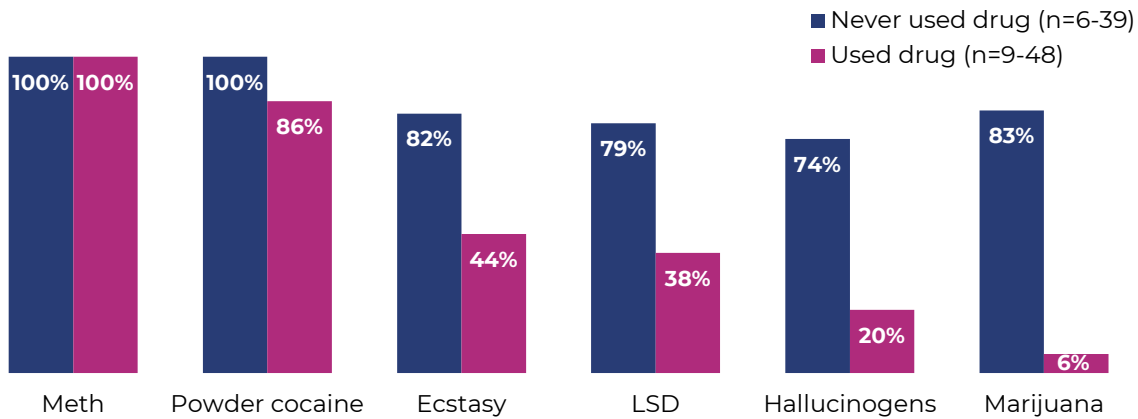


TOTAL = 41-54

Note: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

For some drugs, perception of harm differed significantly depending on whether a youth had previous experience with it. That is, those who had tried the respective drug were less likely to perceive it as very harmful compared to those who had not. As seen in Figure 8, the difference in harm perception was significant regarding marijuana, hallucinogens, LSD, and ecstasy. Marijuana showed the highest difference, as only 6% of those who had used marijuana before perceived it as harmful, compared to 83% of those who had never used it. On the other hand, prior experience with meth did not impact youths’ perception of the drug’s harmfulness.

Figure 8
Relationship between previous substance use and perceived harmfulness*



* Significant at $p < 0.05$

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

When asked about the ease of accessing certain substances, 100% of respondents described marijuana as **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** to obtain (Figure 9). Youths’ perception of marijuana as easier to obtain than both tobacco and alcohol—despite the longstanding legality of those substances—underscores the widespread accessibility and popularity of marijuana compared to other drugs.⁵

Figure 9
Percentage of youth that reported easy access to substances



TOTAL = 11-42

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

When youth who had ever used alcohol were asked how they most recently obtained it, the most common responses included someone 21 years or older gave it to them (29%), they took it from someone else’s home (20%), bought it (20%), or someone under 21 gave it to them (13%) (not shown).

Takeaway

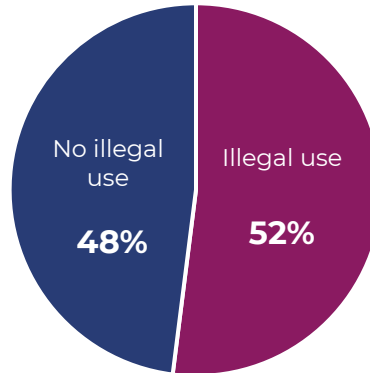
Most youth perceived marijuana, hallucinogens, and alcohol as the least harmful substances to users, though harm perception strongly differed depending on whether the youth had prior experience with the respective drug. This finding highlights the importance of educating youth about drug risks, especially as more than four in five youth perceive the three “gateway” drugs as easy to obtain.

⁵ It is important to note that only five youth provided their perception on the ease of obtaining meth. All five youth reported meth was “very easy” to obtain. Due to this small sample size, it is advised to use caution when interpreting these results.

How many youth used prescription drugs illegally?

Just over half (52%) of surveyed youth reported ever misusing prescription and/or over-the-counter medication (Figure 10), a rate consistent with last year's findings.

Figure 10
Illegal prescription or over-the-counter drug use rates among interviewed youth

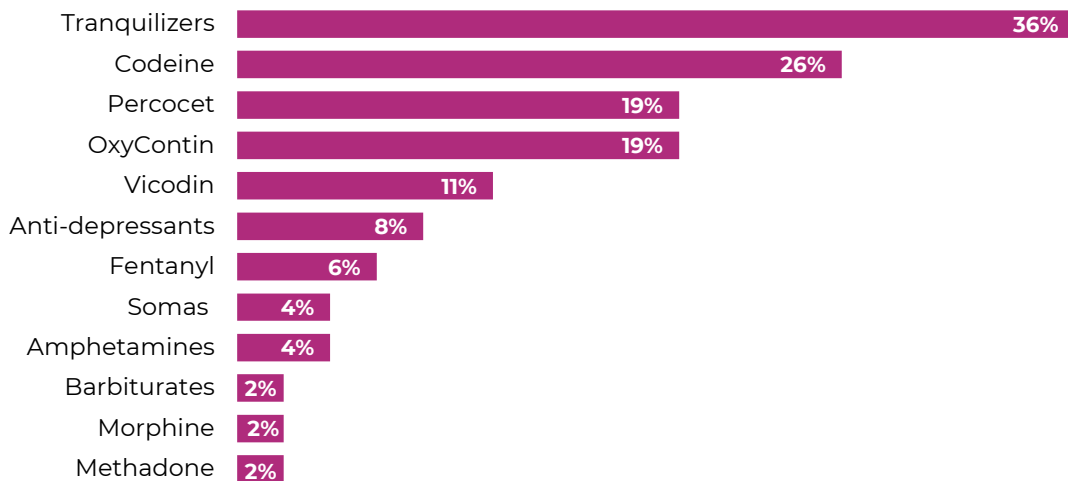


TOTAL = 54

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

The most commonly illegally used prescription drugs⁶ amongst youth were tranquilizers (e.g., Xanax, Valium, Rohypnol/Roachas) (36%) and the most commonly illegally used prescription painkiller⁷ was Codeine (26%) (Figure 11). Other illegally used painkillers included Percocet (19%), OxyContin (19%), Vicodin (11%), fentanyl (6%), methadone (2%) and morphine (2%). Other prescription drugs used illegally included anti-depressants (8%), somas (4%), amphetamines (4%), and barbiturates (2%). Of those who ever used a prescription drug illegally, only tranquilizers were used in the last 30 days (10%).

Figure 11
Most frequently abused prescription drugs among interviewed youth



TOTAL = 52-53

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

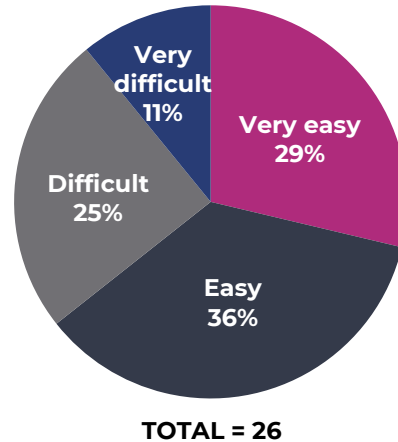
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

⁶ General prescription drugs in the survey instrument include tranquilizers, anti-depressants, barbiturates, Ketamine, Codeine, Dilaudid, Somas, and amphetamines.

⁷ Prescription painkillers in the survey instrument include methadone, Suboxone, Percocet, Vicodin, Demerol, fentanyl, morphine, OxyContin, tramadol, and Darvon.

Of the youth who reported illegal use of prescription drugs, around two thirds said they were **“VERY EASY”** or **“EASY”** to obtain (64%) as opposed to being **“VERY DIFFICULT”** or **“DIFFICULT”** to obtain (Figure 12). This marks the highest proportion of youth in the last five years that say obtaining prescription drugs illegally is easy (not shown).

Figure 12
Perceived ease of obtaining prescription drugs illegally

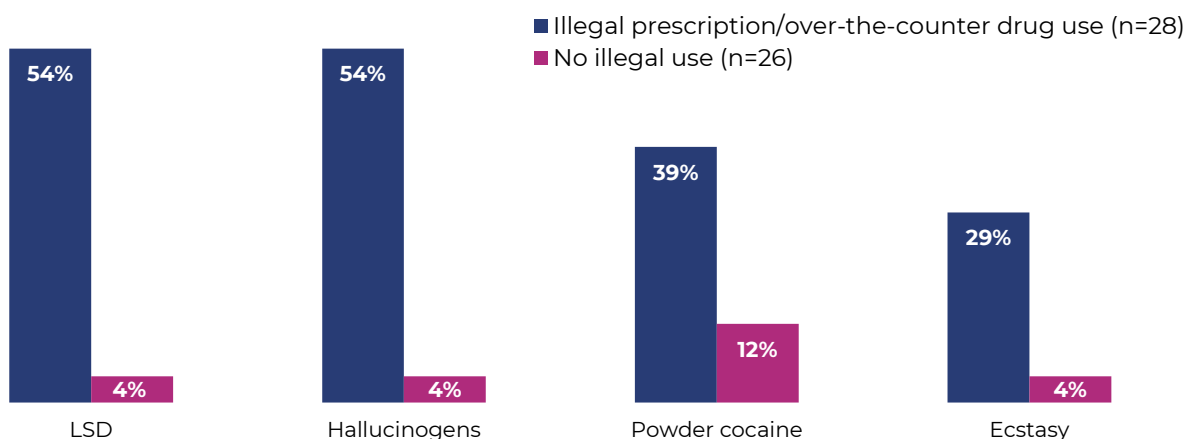


NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding. Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

When asked how they got the prescription drugs, the most common response was that another person gave it to them (78%), with the other person most often being a friend (71%) or an acquaintance (38%). Additionally, nearly half (48%) said they bought it and about one-fourth (26%) took it from someone else. Prescription drugs were most often taken from a family member (43%), friends (43%) or an acquaintance (43%).

Youth who reported abusing prescription or over-the-counter medication were significantly more likely to have tried other illicit drugs. LSD and hallucinogens were the two most frequently tried illicit drugs by youth who misused prescription and/or over-the-counter drugs (Figure 13).

Figure 13
Youth who misuse prescription and/or over-the-counter drugs are significantly more likely to use illicit drugs*



*Significant at $p < 0.05$

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.
SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

Takeaway

More youth reported using illegal prescription drugs than in previous years (4% more than 2022, and 16% more than 2021), with tranquilizers and codeine being the most frequently reported. Youth who used illegal prescription and over-the-counter drugs were more likely to have tried other illicit drugs, including powder cocaine, ecstasy, LSD, and hallucinogens.

How many of these youth have received drug treatment or feel they could use treatment now?

Of all interviewed youth, nine (17%) said they had previously received drug treatment. Of those nine youth, seven had been in treatment once, and two had been three times. The most recent treatment experience was more likely to be court-ordered (5) rather than voluntary (4). Of the seven youth that reported the kind of treatment they received, four were outpatient and three were inpatient. In regard to the drugs they've been treated for, five received treatment for marijuana, three for cocaine/crack, two for alcohol, and two for some other substance or combination of substances. Only two of nine youth reported that they had successfully completed treatment (or the most recent program if they attended multiple).

Youth who did not successfully complete treatment (7) attributed their lack of completion to the program being too long (2), feeling like the program was not helping (2), being kicked out (1), getting arrested (1), being done with probation (1), or still being enrolled in program at the time of interview (1). When asked if they needed or wanted to seek substance treatment now (for a drug they had ever used), only three said they did. Of these three youth, two said they needed it for marijuana, and one for alcohol.

Figure 14

Engagement and interest in substance treatment is low in youth although almost all have tried an illicit substance



SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

What do we know about risk factors and other needs among these youth?

Home environment

- Prior to arrest, 81% of interviewed youth reported living in a stable residence (e.g., house, apartment, mobile home) and 11% said they lived in some type of group setting (including East Mesa or another detention facility, group home, or treatment facility). Four juveniles (7%) were homeless.
- Of those who lived in a stable residence, 74% reported living with their mother and only 30% reported living with their father. Only about one in five (19%) lived with both parents and 14% said they did not live with a parent at all.
- Around one-third (34%) said their immediate family had some type of previous Child Welfare Services (CWS) involvement. Proportionally, female youth were more than twice as likely as male youth to have experienced CWS involvement (53% and 25%, respectively).
- About one in five (21%) had been in foster care at some time in their life.
- More than half (57%) of the interviewed youth said at least one of their parents/guardians had been arrested and booked before. Additionally, more than one in three (37%) said a sibling had been previously booked into a detention facility.
- Two-fifths (40%) of youth said their parents have abused alcohol. A little over one in four youth (28%) disclosed that their parents had used illegal drugs (not including marijuana). When clarifying which drugs, nine (64%) said meth, four (29%) cocaine/crack, four (29%) heroin and one youth (7%) Percocet.
- More than half (53%) of youth said they had previously run away from home. All but one female youth reported ever running away from home (94%) compared to 35% of male youth. While the most common reasons cited were family arguments (56%) and personal mood (56%), 19% reported running away due to abuse.

Mental health

- Nearly one in three (31%) youth reported having previous thoughts about killing themselves and one in five (20%) had made a suicide attempt. Nearly half of all females interviewed reported suicidal thoughts (47%) compared to 24% of male youth.
- About two in five youth (39%) said they had seen a counselor or other professional for emotional, behavior, or mental health issues. Of the 15 youth that had been professionally diagnosed with some kind of issue, most (80%) were prescribed medication for it.
- Almost half (44%) of youth reported feeling like their mental, emotional, or psychological health has gotten in the way of doing activities or accomplishing goals at least once in the past and three quarters (75%) of those youth claimed to have felt this way in the past 30 days.

School work

- At the time of interview, ten (19%) youth were not enrolled in school due to dropping out (6) or being expelled (2). Two youth had already graduated or received their GED.
- Seventy percent (70%) of youth reported they had previously skipped school or been truant. Almost one in three (32%) have been referred to the School Attendance Review Board (SARB).

Home

34%

previous CWS contact

21%

foster care involvement

57%

parental criminal history

40%

parental alcohol abuse

53%

ran away from home

Mental health

31%

have thought about suicide

20%

have made a previous suicide attempt

School

19%

not enrolled at time of interview

70%

history of truancy

30%

have brought a weapon to school

- While the average (mean) number of days truant in the previous month was 4.6 (with a range of 2 to 20), females reported an average of 6.1 days compared to 3.8 days for males.
- Almost one in three youth (30%) reported having taken a weapon to school. Most frequently, the weapon of choice were knives (88%), followed by brass knuckles (25%), and a gun (19%). Of these 16 youth who had brought a weapon to school, most (75%) had done so as a means of protecting themselves. The others claimed they brought a weapon for retaliation (38%), to threaten someone (31%), and as a status symbol (19%).

What is the criminal and other risky behavior history of these youth?

Previous criminal justice involvement

- Almost three-fifths (59%) of the youth reported they had been arrested or booked prior to this current arrest, with an average of 3.5 times (range 1 to 12).
- Nearly three-fourths (74%) of the youth said they have been on probation before, most (95%) of whom were still under probation supervision at the time of interview.
- Of those that had been arrested, about two-fifths (42%) reported ever participating in some type of diversion or alternative sanction program. These programs included the San Diego County Achievement Centers (55%), counseling/therapy (18%), community service (18%) and CHOICE (9%).
- When asked what type of crime they were first arrested for, 50% said a violent crime, 38% property crime, 22% status offense,⁸ 19% drugs, and 9% weapons.
- While most (82%) youth admitted knowing about curfew laws in San Diego County, only around one in three (36%) reported having been stopped by the police for being out past curfew.

Gang affiliation

- Half (50%) of interviewed youth said they were in a gang or have hung out with gang members before. Of these individuals, 85% have done so within the last five years. Regarding their current status, a little over one in three (35%) identified as current members and 12% are no longer members but still associate with current members. Only one youth (4%) said he used to be a gang member and is no longer associated with other members.
- Of those that reported only hanging out with gang members, 35% said they still hang out with members and 15% said they no longer do.
- On average, these youth began to hang with a gang when they were 12 years of age (range 1 to 16). Almost one in five (19%) started before the age of ten.
- Of those five youth with former (but no current) gang associations, three youth attributed it to growing tired of the lifestyle, two moved, and one responded it was too dangerous.

Justice system related behaviors

59%

have been previously arrested

42%

have participated in a diversion or alternative sanction program

General risky behaviors

50%

in gang or associated with one

40%

have been involved in drug distribution

17%

have committed a crime to get money for drugs

53%

of females have been approached for human trafficking

19%

have been approached to transport drugs across the border

⁸ A status offense is a noncriminal act that is considered a law violation only because of a youth's status as a minor.

Risky behaviors related to substance use

- Nearly one-fifth (17%) of interviewed youth reported they had previously committed a crime to get money to buy drugs.
- Almost two-fifths (40%) of youth said they had some previous involvement in drug distribution – either selling drugs, serving as a middleman, or both. The most common drugs distributed included marijuana (95%), powder cocaine (19%), meth (19%), and ecstasy (14%). Only 10% of youth reported helping distribute crack cocaine, LSD, and oxycontin/oxycodone, respectively. Additionally, over one-fourth (27%) of youth reported “other” drugs, which included prescription pills, tranquilizers, vapes and nicotine.
- Almost one-fourth (23%) of those ever involved in drug distribution said they had been involved in the past 30 days.
- Three youth (6%) reported having a previous drug overdose. One reported overdosing on cocaine laced with fentanyl, another on Percocet, and the third on various substances, including powder cocaine, prescription drugs, and hallucinogens. None of the youth said they had ever been administered naloxone, and none of them knew how to obtain naloxone if they wanted to.
- Youth were asked a series of questions regarding their experiences with risky behaviors related to substance use in the past 12 months. The most frequent experiences reported included getting in trouble with their parents for drinking or using drugs (48%), riding in a car with a driver who was under the influence (47%) and going to school intoxicated or under the influence (46%). Table 1 describes these experiences in further detail.

Table 1
Many juvenile arrestees have participated in risky behaviors related to substance use

Type of Experience Related to Substance Use	Percentage
Got in trouble with their parents for drinking or using drugs	48%
Rode in a car with a driver who was under the influence	47%
Went to school under the influence	46%
Got in a physical fight while or after drinking or using drugs	39%
Participated in sexual acts while or after drinking or using drugs	34%
Felt incapable of remembering what happened after drinking or using drugs	33%
Missed school because of drinking or using drugs	33%
Got sick or experienced a hangover as a result of drinking or using drugs	32%
Passed out while drinking or using drugs	32%
Felt regret about something they did while drunk or high	25%
Drove a car during or after drinking or using drugs	19%
Had health problems relate to alcohol and/or drug use	2%
TOTAL	52-54

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG, 2023

Additional risk factors

- Of the 18 youth that reported having participated in sexual acts while under the influence, 39% said they never used condoms, and 28% said they only used condoms some of the time.
- One in five (20%) youth interviewed said they have been approached by someone offering to pimp or prostitute them. This rate represents 53% of all females interviewed and only 5% of all male youth. On average, these youth were 13 years of age when it first happened (range 12-14). These interactions most often occurred at school (55%), online (55%), at the mall (18%), and at a park or recreational center (18%).
- Two youth (1 female, 1 male) said they had been involved in pimping or pandering activities and four youth (three females, one male) reported ever engaging in prostitution.
- Almost two-fifths (39%) of those interviewed reported they had ever carried a gun. When asked how they obtained it, the most common responses were from a friend (70%) or bought off the street (30%). When asked how easy it was to get a gun, 47% said **“EASY,”** 42% said **“VERY EASY”** and only 11% said it was **“DIFICULT”**.
- One-fifth (20%) of youth reported they had crossed the U.S./Mexico border to drink alcohol, beginning at an average age of 14 (range 12 to 15).
- While only 6% reported crossing the border to bring drugs into the U.S. illegally, 19% reported they had previously been approached to transport drugs across the border.