

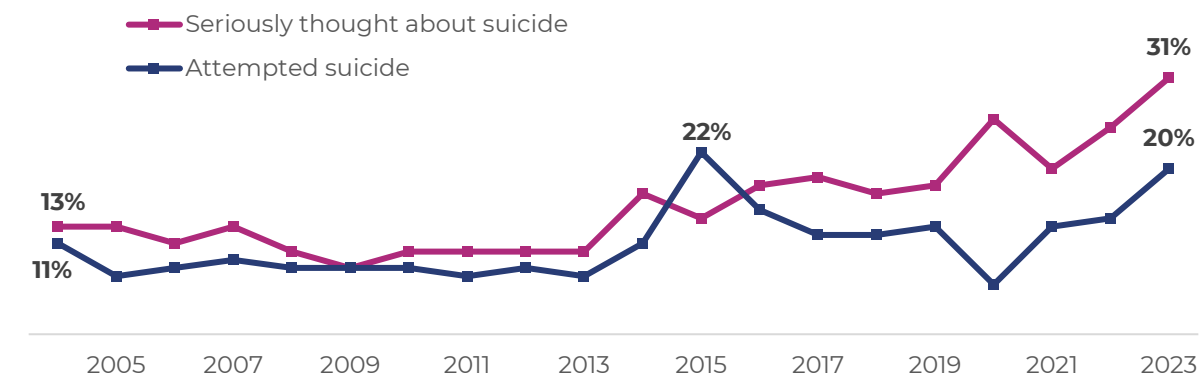
## Mental Health and Substance Use Among Juvenile Arrestees in 2023

In light of May's designation as National Mental Health Awareness Month, this CJ Flash explores the intersectionality between mental health and substance use patterns among juvenile arrestees in the San Diego Region. In 2023, nearly one in three (31%) interviewed youth reported previous suicidal thoughts and one in five (20%) reported a previous suicide attempt, marking the highest recorded percentage of interviewed youth that have thought about ending their own lives. Notably, youth that reported experiencing mental health difficulties showed higher rates of overall substance use than their peers who did not report these difficulties. Addressing mental health in the context of justice involved youth is a crucial step toward reducing stigma and promoting early intervention, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated preexisting challenges. Findings on juvenile arrestee substance use are discussed in further detail in the [SANDAG 2023 Juvenile Arrestee Drug Use in the San Diego Region Bulletin](#).

### Highlight 1: Highest recorded rate of suicidal thoughts among interviewed youth

When the question was first asked in 2004, just over one in ten interviewed youth reported ever thinking about or attempting suicide (13% and 11%, respectively). These rates have grown to nearly one in three (31%) and one in five (20%) in 2023, marking the highest rate of suicidal thoughts ever observed, and the highest rate of suicide attempts since 2015.<sup>1</sup> Findings also point to gender differences in suicidal behavior. In 2023, a higher proportion of female youth reported suicidal thoughts (47% compared to 24%) and suicidal attempts (29% compared to 16%) than their male counterparts (not shown).

**Figure 1: Percentage of youth who have reported suicidal thoughts and attempts over time (2004-2023)**



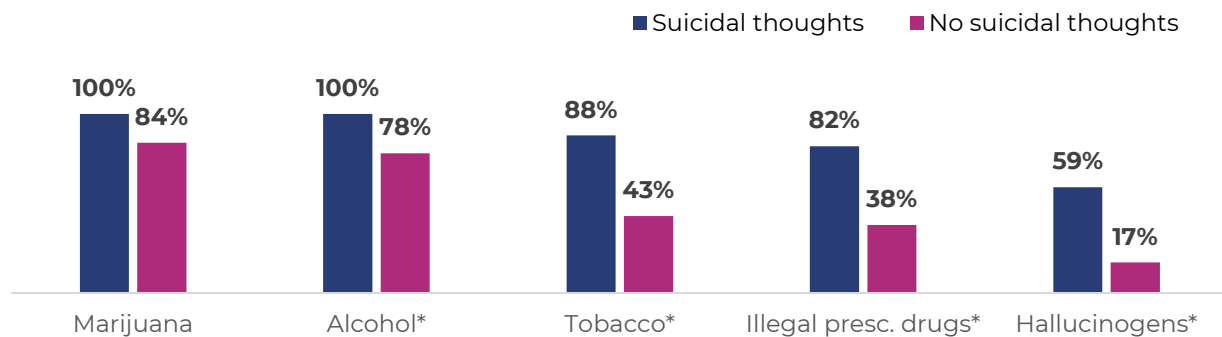
Source: SANDAG

<sup>1</sup> The number of youth interviewed has substantially decreased over time and should be taken into consideration when reviewing these results. While 2004 included a sample of 175 youth, 2023 included a sample of 54. This decrease can be largely attributed to an increase in detention alternatives and more recently, booking and intake procedural changes related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Highlight 2: Youth facing mental health challenges show higher rates of overall substance use than those without such challenges

Youth who expressed mental health difficulties (across various indicators) showed higher rates of overall substance use than their peers who did not report such difficulties. Following the three gateway drugs (marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco), illegal prescription drugs were the most commonly used by youth struggling with mental health. Specifically, over four in five youth (82%) who reported ever having suicidal thoughts also reported misuse of prescription drugs, compared to 38% among youth who did not report such thoughts. Notably, youth with previous suicidal thoughts were almost three times as likely to report the use of hallucinogens (59% compared to 17%).

**Figure 2: Top five substance use rates among youth with suicidal thoughts**



\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$

Source: SANDAG

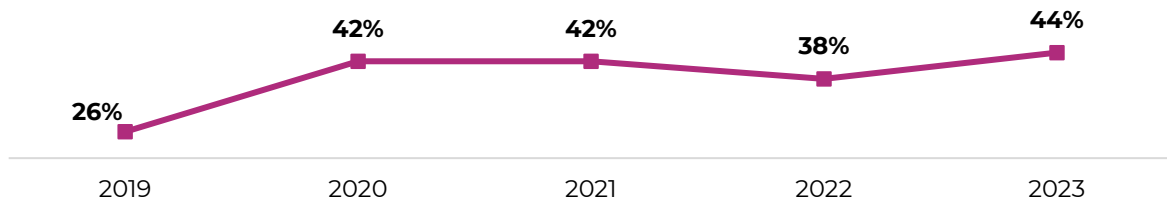
## Highlight 3: More than two in five youth say their mental or emotional health has interfered with achieving their tasks and goals

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a notable increase in the percentage of juveniles who reported feeling like their mental or emotional health interferes with accomplishing their tasks and goals. From 2019 to 2020, the percentage of youth who reported feeling this way grew from 26% to 42% and has remained relatively consistent since then. While a causal relationship between this increase and the global pandemic cannot be established, the negative effects of the pandemic (social isolation, family hardship, disruption of routine) on youths' mental health has been well-documented.<sup>2</sup> Some studies show the strongest impacts on those who were already vulnerable, including racial and ethnic minorities, youth with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ youth.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jones, Sherry Everett. 2022. "Mental Health, Suicidality, and Connectedness among High School Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic — Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, January–June 2021." *MMWR Supplements* 71 (3). <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.su7103a3>.

<sup>3</sup> Cora Collette Breuner, and David L Bell. 2023. "Adolescent Mental and Behavioral Health: COVID-19 Exacerbation of a Prevailing Crisis." *Pediatrics* 151 (Supplement 1). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2022-057267d>.

**Figure 3: Percentage of youth whose mental health has interfered with achieving their goals over the last five years**

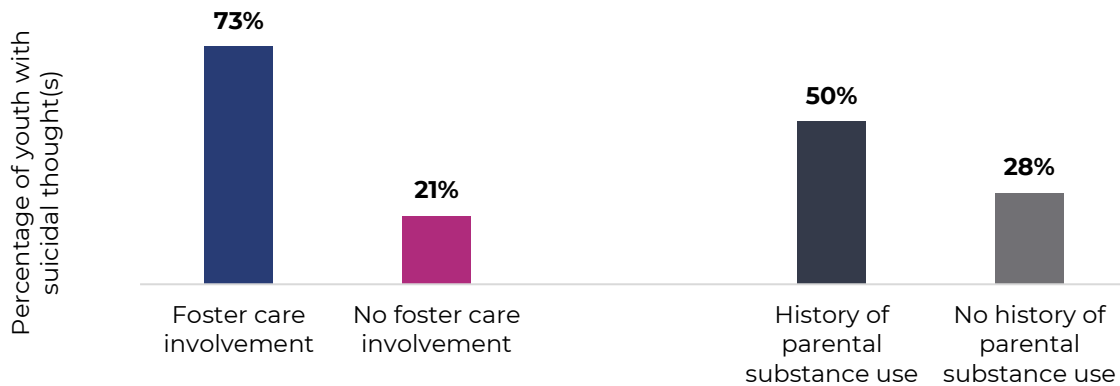


Source: SANDAG

**Highlight 4: Youth with foster care involvement and history of parental substance use at higher risk of negative mental health outcomes**

Youth who reported prior involvement in the foster care system and those with a history of parental substance use were more likely to report mental health difficulties than those without these histories. Of youth who had been in foster care, nearly three in four (73%) reported having seriously considered ending their own lives, compared to 21% of those who had never been in foster care. Youth whose parents have used illegal drugs (outside of marijuana) were almost twice as likely to report suicidal thoughts than their counterparts (50% compared to 28%). These findings underscore the importance of addressing such risk factors early on to prevent the escalation of mental health disorders, and relatedly, juvenile substance use.

**Figure 4: Percentage of youth who reported suicidal thoughts along foster care involvement and parental substance use history**



Source: SANDAG

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