



# Gang Involvement Among San Diego County Arrestees in 2010

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# GANG INVOLVEMENT AMONG SAN DIEGO COUNTY ARRESTEES IN 2010

## Project Overview

The nexus between gangs and crime is commonly accepted and well documented in the research. While crime has been trending downward, gang activity and membership have been reported to be on the increase. According to the recently released National Gang Threat Assessment (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2011), a steady resurgence of gang problems has occurred in many jurisdictions in recent years. In addition to increasing numbers, gangs are expanding into more non-traditional criminal enterprises such as pimping/pandering, human trafficking, and white-collar crimes.

San Diego County has not necessarily seen an increase in gang membership or gang sets with approximately 170 different gangs consisting of around 7,700 members (San Diego Police Department, 2011). However, the region has experienced the diversification of gang activities with human trafficking (e.g. prostitution) and pimping/pandering gaining increased attention from law enforcement, non-profit organizations, and the U.S. Attorney's Office. Additionally, because of San Diego County's close proximity to the Mexican border, some local gangs under the supervision of the Mexican Mafia are trafficking narcotics for the cartels on the U.S. side of the border (San Diego Police Department, 2010).

## Bulletin Highlights

- Juvenile arrestees (76%) were more likely than adults (57%) to report current gang involvement.
- Nearly two-thirds (62%) of arrestees reported that other family members were also in a gang, but not necessarily in the same one.
- One-third (33%) of gang-involved arrestees admit to engaging in pimping or prostitution.
- Around one-quarter (24%) of gang-involved juvenile arrestees reported using social networking sites to communicate with or about gang members.
- Arrestees were more likely to report their involvement in fighting, theft, and robbery increased after becoming gang members, compared to other illegal behaviors.
- More than half (52%) of gang-affiliated arrestees reported having carried a gun and most (78%) reported it was easy to obtain.
- Gang involvement was not seen as a permanent life choice for the majority of interviewees, with 67 percent stating that at some point they would end their affiliation with the gang.
- Over two in five (42%) of those individuals who expressed a desire to leave the gang did not know of any resources to help them do so.
- Nearly one-third (32%) of gang-affiliated juvenile arrestees reported ever being in foster care and four out of five (79%) had ever run away from home.

Because of the connection between crime and gangs, and the amount of local resources directed at addressing gang activity, SANDAG expanded its annual bulletins on crime to take a closer look at characteristics of gangs in the region. This SANDAG CJ Bulletin is part of a series<sup>1</sup> highlighting findings from data collected as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of this project, adult and juvenile arrestees are approached within 48 hours of their booking into a local detention facility to conduct an interview regarding their drug use and other recent behaviors. Beginning in 2008, arrestees who reported any gang affiliation<sup>2</sup>, either in the past (if within five years for adults or ever for youth) or currently, were asked to complete an addendum regarding their involvement with the gang, including how it started, how it related to involvement in illegal activity, and any desire they had to leave the gang. This research bulletin presents this information, including analyses by arrestee age (adult or juvenile sample) and gender.

Since 2004, when federal funding for the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program was suspended, San Diego has been the only site to continue this project uninterrupted. In 2010, this data collection effort was generously supported by the California Border Alliance Group (CBAG), County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services (ADS), the District Attorney's Office, and the Public Safety Group. Their support, as well as the support of the region's local jurisdictions through the Criminal Justice

Clearinghouse and cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff's and Probation Departments, is gratefully acknowledged.

## **How Many Arrestees Report Having a Gang Affiliation?**

During 2010, 547 adult males, 255 adult females, 103 juvenile males, and 28 juvenile females were interviewed as part of the SAM program. Of these individuals, 24 percent of adult males, 17 percent of adult females, 38 percent of juvenile males, and 28 percent of juvenile females reported having ever affiliated with a gang (not shown). For comparison purposes, research among samples of youth in high-risk areas of large U.S. cities suggests from 15 to 32 percent of youth have some history of gang affiliation (Howell, 2010).

Of the 47 juveniles with any self-reported affiliation (38 males and 9 females), 46 (98%) completed a gang addendum. For adults, only those who reported any affiliation within the past five years (51%) were asked to complete the gang addendum. Of these 88 adults, 85 (97%) completed an addendum (59 males and 26 females) (not shown).

## **What is the Nature of the Gang Affiliation for These Arrestees?**

At the beginning of the gang addendum, interviewees were asked to describe if they were a current or former member, or a current or former associate. Understanding the full scope of gang membership is a challenge because of the lack of a uniform definition. While an individual may claim gang membership, s/he is not "officially" counted as a gang member by the state of California unless documented in CalGANG®.

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<sup>1</sup> Bulletins summarizing results of adult interviews, as well as a methamphetamine addendum, will be released simultaneously with the Gang Bulletin. A bulletin describing juvenile arrestee data was released in July 2011.

<sup>2</sup> A specific definition was not given to arrestees regarding how gang affiliation was defined, allowing the individuals being interviewed to decide for themselves how they should be categorized. However, interviewers were instructed to include individuals who identified themselves as "skinheads" or "taggers" if asked.

## State Criteria for Documenting Gang Members

According to Section 2.18 of CalGANG®’s 2007 Policy and Procedures, an individual is “documented” (or entered into the CalGANG® database) as a gang member when two of the following criteria are met\*:

- Admits to being a gang member.
- Has been arrested with known gang members for offenses consistent with gang activity.
- Has been identified as a gang member by a reliable informant/source.
- Has been identified as a gang member by an informant.
- Has been seen affiliating with documented gang members.
- Has been seen displaying gang symbols and/or hand signs.
- Has been seen frequenting gang identified areas.
- Has been seen wearing gang dress.
- Is known to have gang tattoos.

\* The only single criteria approved for entry into CalGANG® is an in-custody jail classification interview.

Note: Any record in the CalGANG® system that have not been updated with new criteria in a 5-year period is purged. This policy includes individuals in custody.

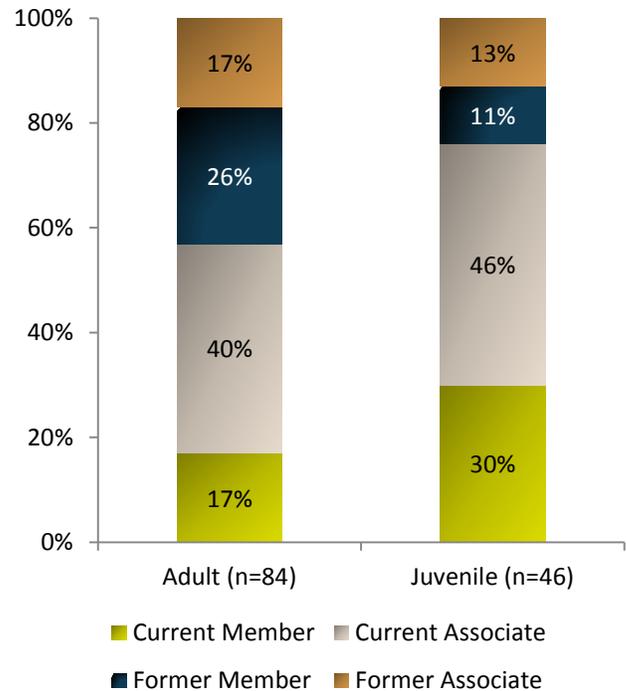
SOURCE: CalGANG®, 2007

As Figure 1 shows, juveniles (both males and females) were more likely to report current gang involvement (either membership or association) (76%), compared to adults (57%). Additionally, over half of each group (58%) claimed only to be associated with a gang, either currently or in the past (not shown). However, the general consensus in the field is that gang associates are also involved in delinquent and criminal activity, and as such,

prevention and intervention activities should not ignore this population, even though they are not formal members of the gang (Howell, 2010).

FIGURE 1

### JUVENILES MORE LIKELY TO REPORT CURRENT GANG INVOLVEMENT



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included  
 SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

In terms of this affiliation being known by the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, around two-fifths of adults and juveniles reported that they had been documented by law enforcement as a gang member (43%) and that they had gang conditions as part of their probation orders (39%). In addition, almost one-quarter (23%) said they had ever been under the supervision of the Probation Department’s gang suppression unit. Males were significantly more likely than females to report each of these gang-related supervision requirements, including being documented (54% versus 15%) and having gang conditions (48% versus 15%) (not shown).

## How Many of These Individuals Have Family Members in Gangs?

Around two-thirds (62%) of these arrestees with a gang affiliation reported that other family members were also in a gang, with 70 percent of these reporting that this involvement was current. When asked if these relatives were in the same or a different gang, 27 percent said they were all in the same gang, 28 percent that some were in the same gang, and 44 percent were all in different gangs (not shown). When asked to describe how they were related to these other individuals, the most common responses included cousins (59%) and siblings (34%) (Table 1). “Other” relatives include aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and blended family members.

**TABLE 1**  
**ARRESTEES MOST LIKELY TO REPORT**  
**COUSINS AND SIBLINGS ARE ALSO IN A**  
**GANG**

Cousin	59%
Sibling	34%
Other	33%
Father	24%
Mother	9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>

*NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.*

*SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010*

## How Did Gang Affiliation Begin for These Individuals?

Researchers agree that the dynamics of gang formation are complex and that youth joining an established gang do so typically in a manner similar to joining more mainstream organizations, with more informal association developing for some individuals into formal membership (Howell, 2010). As such, arrestees were asked how old they were when they first became involved with gangs, and if they became a member, how much time passed before they joined. On average, these individuals reported being 13.4 years of age ( $SD = 4.9$ ) when the association began and while some formally joined after as little as 8 days or as long as 14 years, the average was 2.5 years ( $SD = 3.0$ ) (not shown).

When asked what their motivation was for becoming a gang member or associating with the gang, the most common reason given was because of their friends' gang involvement (79%), followed by that it provided a network of belonging/peers (46%). In addition, two in five (40%) noted that their family members were involved with the gang. These findings of involvement being related to family and friends are consistent with cross-site longitudinal research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues. Although only 10 percent stated they joined the gang for protection, when asked further about protection after becoming involved with the gang, more than two-thirds (67%) reported that the gang offered protection at some level, with no difference by gender or age. When these 86 individuals were asked who was offered protection, 77 percent said their neighborhood, 72 percent themselves, and 52 percent their family (not shown).

**TABLE 2**

**PEERS CITED AS TOP REASON FOR BEGINNING GANG INVOLVEMENT**

Friends are members/associates	79%
Gives sense of belonging	46%
Relatives are members/associates	40%
Drug dealing/making money	14%
Provides protection	10%
Provides status	13%
Forced/coerced	1%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>131</b>

*NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.*

*SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010*

When asked what individuals have to do to become a member of the gang, the most common method was being “jumped in” or fighting with fellow gang members (84%), with others describing initiation as involving fighting someone in another gang (32%), committing illegal acts other than stealing (20%), theft (17%), or other illegal actions (4%) (that vary from member to member and often relate to proving one’s self and dedication to the gang) (not shown).

### What Types of Activities do These Individuals Report Engaging in With the Gang?

Arrestees who reported some type of current or past gang affiliation were asked whether they engaged in specific legal and illegal activities regularly with their friends/peers in the gang. As Table 3 shows, almost all (98%) said that they hang out, with another 95 percent saying they get high or drunk, 86 percent attend house parties, 85 percent get in fights, and 81 percent “cruise”. Between one-third to more than two-thirds also reported participating in a variety of illegal acts with their gang, including theft, graffiti, and robbery. Adults were significantly more likely than juveniles to report pimping or

prostituting (40% versus 22%, respectively) (not shown).

**TABLE 3**

**GANG-INVOLVED ARRESTEES REPORT PARTICIPATING IN BOTH CRIMINAL AND NON-CRIMINAL ACTIVITIES**

Hang out	98%
Get high/drunk	95%
House parties	86%
Get in fights	85%
Cruise	81%
Theft	69%
Graffiti	64%
Robbery	62%
Vandalism	57%
Motor vehicle theft	56%
Pimp or Prostitute	33%
Other	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>126</b>

*NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.*

*SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010*

When asked if they communicated with or about the gang on social networking sites, there was a significant difference between juveniles and adults, with around one in four (24%) juveniles reporting that they did, compared to only 9 percent of adults.

### Gang Involvement in Pimping/Pandering

With an increase over the past few years in gang-related cases involving pimping and pandering in San Diego, the San Diego County District Attorney’s Office has argued in court for additional gang enhancements to be added to the defendant’s criminal charges. This enhanced allegation can increase a defendant’s maximum sentence for pimping from 6 to 10 years in state prison and also qualifies the conviction as a strike under California’s three-strikes law. Assembly Bill 918, which is currently in committee, would add pimping, pandering, and human trafficking to those crimes considered gang-related activities.

These findings are consistent with gang research that has documented an increase in the use of social media among gangs. Specifically, gangs have used the Internet to recruit members, antagonize rival gangs, and commit an assortment of non-traditional crimes such as identity theft or prostitution (Ferrell, 2008). Additionally, anecdotal information from local law enforcement, as well as formal research, has drawn attention to neighborhood house parties which provide a venue for gang recruitment, as well as being the scene of violence, the latter being fueled when alcohol, drugs, and or weapons are involved (NGIC, 2011; Knox, 2006). For example, in 2010 after several outbreaks of violence stemming from house parties, the San Diego Police Department gathered intelligence and saturated targeted areas to reduce the house parties and incidents.

### What Social Factors do These Individuals Perceive as Being Related to Gang Affiliation?

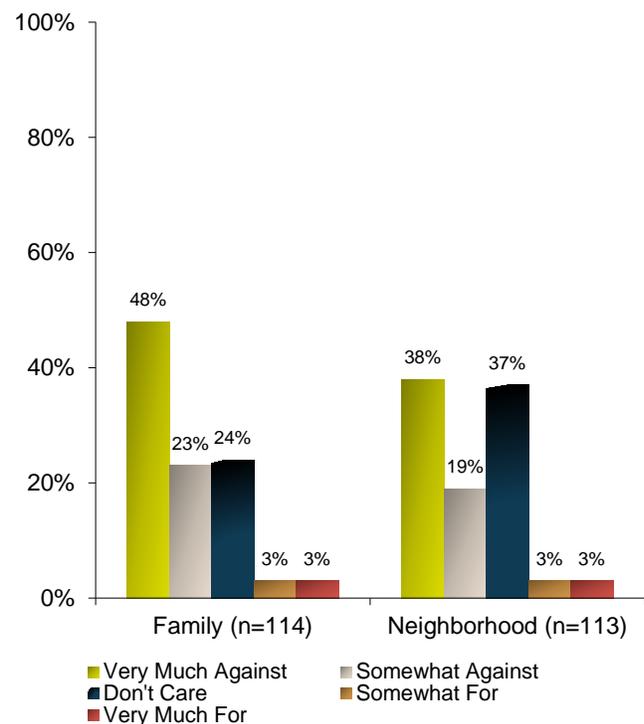
When asked how their families and neighbors felt about gang involvement, around half (48%) said their family was “very much against” their involvement, compared to over one in three (38%) of their neighbors feeling this way about gangs in general (Figure 2). In terms of family opinion, an interesting gender difference was identified, with males significantly more likely to report their family was “very much against” or “somewhat against” their involvement, compared to females (81% versus 47%, respectively) (not shown). In addition, around one-quarter (24%) overall reported that their family did not care about their gang involvement, a challenge that may be of interest to those involved in gang intervention efforts (not shown).

Regarding neighbors’ opinions of gangs, there was no difference between adults and juveniles or by gender, but the difference

compared to the family ratings is worth noting. Specifically, while 57 percent thought their neighbors were opposed to gangs, 43 percent said that others they live near either “didn’t care” (37%) or to a lesser extent were in favor of gang involvement (6%) (Figure 2), indicating that these individuals may live in communities where there is a reluctance to exert social pressure against gang culture. This finding is of interest because research examining risk factors for gang membership has found that neighborhood characteristics may exert influence indirectly through overall disorganization, lack of resources, and the inhibition of prosocial bonds (Howell & Egly, 2005).

FIGURE 2

#### MOST ARRESTEES SAY FAMILY CARES ABOUT THEIR GANG INVOLVEMENT BUT NEIGHBORHOOD MAY NOT CARE OVERALL



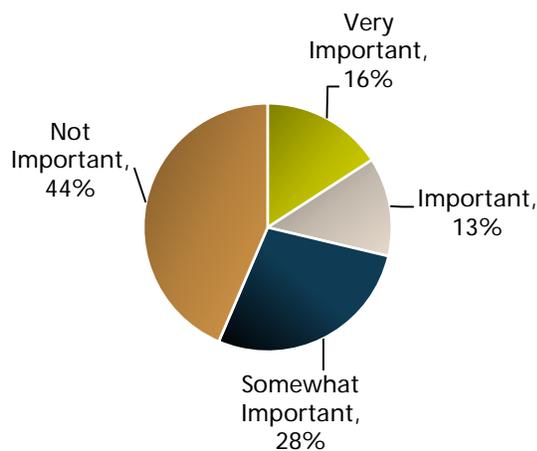
NOTE: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

In addition to asking interviewees to describe their neighbors' opinions of gangs, respondents also were asked for their perception of how important gang membership is for youth in their neighborhood. More than one-quarter said gang membership was "very important" or "important" (29% combined), while others felt it was "somewhat important" (28%) or "not important" (44%) (Figure 3). These findings support the philosophy among juvenile justice experts that a comprehensive community approach is needed to address the prevalence of gangs.

**FIGURE 3**

**ARRESTEES DIFFER REGARDING HOW IMPORTANT GANG MEMBERSHIP IS FOR YOUTH IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD**



TOTAL = 87

*NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding. Cases with missing information not included.*

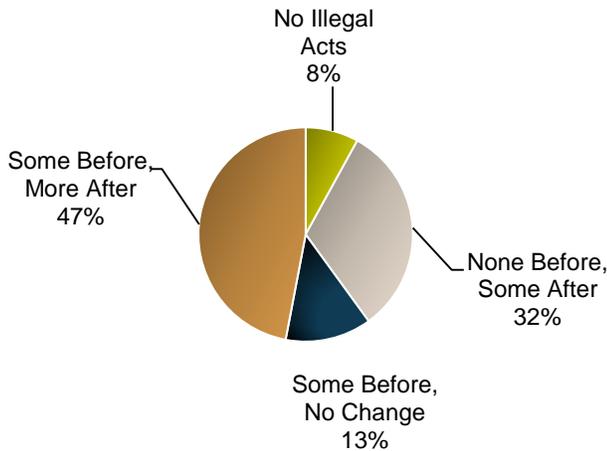
*SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010*

## How Involved are Gang Members in Illegal Activity Before and After Affiliation Begins?

According to leading researchers in the field such as Maxson and Klein (2006), one of the most enduring findings is that youth who join gangs commit more crime than those who do not, and that gang members also commit a variety of different illegal acts (i.e., they are generalists rather than specialists). As such, gang members were asked if they had committed illegal acts prior to joining the gang, as well as if they had begun to commit acts, or if the frequency of these acts had increased after they joined the gang. As Figure 4 shows, almost half (47%) answered affirmatively to both questions – they committed illegal acts before joining the gang and the frequency of these acts increased after joining – and 32 percent said they did not engage in illegal activity before, but they did after association began. In addition, 13 percent said they committed illegal acts before and after joining with no change in frequency, and 8 percent said they had not committed illegal acts.

**FIGURE 4**

**MOST GANG MEMBERS REPORT COMMITTING SOME CRIME BEFORE MEMBERSHIP AND AN INCREASE AFTER JOINING**



TOTAL = 60

NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.  
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

Respondents were asked whether they either began or increased the frequency of committing illegal acts after joining a gang. As Table 4 shows, for the 26 individuals who said they either began or increased illegal activity, most said they engaged in fights (85%), theft (58%), robbery (58%) and getting drunk and/or high (54%). When all of the gang members were asked with whom they most often committed these illegal acts (after becoming a gang member), 66 percent said they did so with fellow gang members, 23 percent alone, and 11 percent with non-gang individuals (not shown).

**TABLE 4**

**ILLEGAL ACTIONS BEGAN OR INCREASED AFTER GANG MEMBERSHIP**

	Percent Began/Increased
Fights	85%
Theft	58%
Robbery	58%
Getting drunk/high	54%
Dealing drugs	50%
Vandalism	42%
Motor vehicle theft	31%
Graffiti/tagging	35%
Motor vehicle theft	30%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>26</b>

NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses. Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

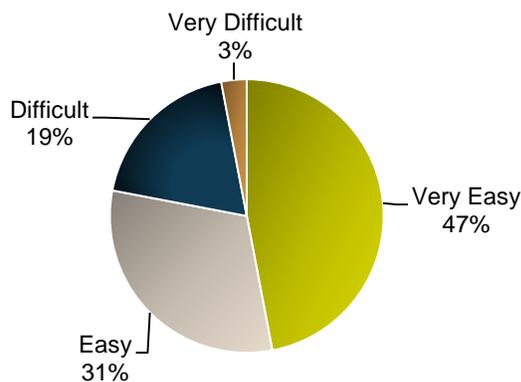
**How Many of These Gang-Involved Arrestees Have Carried a Gun?**

Previous research has shown that gang members are more likely than other similar aged offenders to carry guns (Lizotte et al., 2000). Overall, slightly more than half (52%) of the gang-affiliated arrestees interviewed reported that they had previously carried a gun. Worth noting are those individuals who reported ever carrying a gun were significantly more likely to report they dealt drugs and committed robbery after becoming involved in the gang (66%), compared to those who had never carried a gun (34%). When asked how they had obtained the gun, the most frequent response was through a friend or other gang member (50%), followed by that they had bought it from someone off the street (28%), gotten it from a family member or purchased it from a store (11%, each). In addition, 13 percent described other ways, which included “finding it” or stealing it from someone or it was given to them by a friend (not shown).

When individuals who had ever carried a gun were asked how difficult it was to obtain one, around three in four (78%) said “very easy” or “easy” combined (Figure 5).

**FIGURE 5**

**MOST GANG-AFFILIATED ARRESTEES WHO HAVE CARRIED A GUN REPORT IT IS EASY OR VERY EASY TO GET ONE**



TOTAL = 68

*NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.  
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010*

**Do These Individuals With Current Gang Affiliations Want to Leave This Lifestyle?**

According to the research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues, the majority of gang participation is limited to one year or less, with most gang members ending their affiliation voluntarily at some point in time. For this interview, when arrestees who reported current affiliation with a gang were asked if they wanted to end it, around one in three (31%) said they did. However, 11 of these 88 individuals (13%) said that even though they wanted to leave, they felt they could not for a variety of reasons, including that they were tied to the gang through their family (5), or feared reprisals from fellow gang members (4) or other gang members (2).

In another question regarding if they ever envisioned their affiliation ending (perhaps not now but eventually), 67 percent said yes, which included 24 of the 28 individuals who expressed an interest in leaving now, as well as 33 other individuals (not shown). When asked if they knew of any people or programs in the community that could assist them in ending this association, around two in five (42%) responded that they did not know, suggesting that there are further opportunities for outreach and education to this population across the region (not shown).

**How do These Individuals Differ from Non-Gang-Affiliated Individuals?**

Tables 5 and 6 present comparisons for the adult and juvenile arrestees who reported gang affiliation and those who did not. Some significant differences worth noting are listed below.

- Gang-affiliated adults were more likely to have prior arrest histories, including as a juvenile, and to have served time in prison.
- Gang-affiliated juveniles were more likely to have family risk factors, such as having parents who use drugs, ever being in foster care, running away from home, and being involved with the child protection system.
- Gang-affiliated juveniles were more likely to report ever bringing a weapon to school.
- Both adults and juveniles with gang affiliation were more likely to have ever used a number of drugs, with more testing positive for marijuana and/or meth at time of arrest.

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
<b>Demographics</b>		
Ever homeless	65%	43%
Ever foster care	20%	9%
<b>Justice Related</b>		
Ever arrested	87%	74%
Juvenile arrest	61%	28%
Ever felony	64%	53%
Ever prison	34%	18%
Ever jail	83%	66%
Ever pimped	9%	3%
Ever prostituted	15%	8%
Ever sold drugs	37%	14%
<b>Substance Use</b>		
Ever marijuana	99%	78%
Ever binge alcohol	87%	79%
Ever meth	64%	45%
Ever heroin	33%	16%
Ever cocaine	55%	40%
Ever prescription drugs illegally	65%	34%
Ever other drugs	82%	47%
Current tobacco	78%	60%
Marijuana past 30 days	62%	40%
Heroin past 30 days	15%	5%
Meth past 30 days	34%	21%
Positive marijuana	49%	32%
Positive meth	34%	25%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>173-174</b>	<b>623-627</b>

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.  
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

	Gang Affiliation	No Gang Affiliation
<b>Demographics</b>		
Ever foster care	32%	10%
Lived with mom past 30 days	56%	78%
Ever involved with child protection system	48%	26%
Ever run away from home	79%	48%
Ever diagnosed with ADD/HD	79%	48%
Parents use drugs	36%	14%
<b>Justice Related</b>		
Ever brought a weapon to school	38%	11%
Ever committed vandalism	62%	40%
Ever committed auto theft	34%	7%
Ever committed burglary	40%	22%
Ever served time	77%	56%
<b>Substance Use</b>		
Ever marijuana	98%	84%
Ever ecstasy	57%	28%
Ever inhalants	36%	17%
Ever prescription drugs illegally	45%	22%
Ever over the counter	39%	14%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>41-47</b>	<b>72-85</b>

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.  
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2010

## Summary

In 2008, the Criminal Justice Research Division of SANDAG implemented an addendum to the adult and juvenile Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) survey conducted with arrestees in San Diego County. The purpose of this addendum was to capture additional insights that would be useful to local practitioners and policy makers regarding gangs in the San Diego region.

The results of these interviews in 2010 revealed that current gang affiliation (either membership or association) was more common for juveniles than adults. The most common reason for affiliating with the gang was initially related to peers who were doing so or family who were involved in the gang lifestyle, although it appears that many family members were active in different gangs, not necessarily the same one as the respondent. Gang members reported they first began associating with the gang around the age of 13 on average, that initiation commonly involved violent acts, and that many perceived the gang would offer protection to them, their families, and neighborhoods. Once in the gang, individuals reported participating in both legal and illegal activities, although it was clear that there was an increase in criminal activities, including theft, fighting, and robbery. Most individuals who had ever carried a gun said obtaining a gun was “very easy” or “easy”. Consistent with prior research, most of those interviewed either reported they had already stopped associating with the gang or anticipated that they would at some point. Both juvenile and adult arrestees with gang affiliation were significantly more likely to report having a history of an unstable living environment, contact with the criminal justice system, and a more extensive problem with substance abuse.

While this information should be interpreted acknowledging obvious limitations (e.g., self-

reported nature of the information, including that the nature of the gang relationship was self-defined), it is consistent with other research in the field and speaks to the need for comprehensive strategies to address gang involvement that include prevention, intervention, and suppression.

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