An Overview of San Diego's Substance Abuse Monitoring Program and Law Enforcement's Need and Use of Local Information

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Background

While a number of measures of self-reported drug use are collected at the national level, only one – the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program – supplemented self-report information with an objective measure of recent use – urinalysis – among a high-risk population. Implemented by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) in 1987 as the Drug Use Forecasting (DUF) program, this cross-site data collection effort, which involved conducting interviews with arrestees recently booked into local detention facilities, was discontinued in 2004. At that time, there were a total of 40 national sites and the data were utilized across the country by prevention providers, treatment staff, law enforcement, and epidemiologists to track drug use trends among a high-risk population.

San Diego County was one of the original sites for the program and one of the few that conducted interviews with juveniles, as well as adults. The site coordinators analyzed and distributed the results for a local audience that eagerly utilized the information as part of their prevention and intervention efforts. For example, these data have been used by the San Diego County Methamphetamine (Meth) Strike Force (a multi-disciplinary group of public health, law enforcement, judicial, treatment, prevention, and intervention agencies that meets on a quarterly basis to share information regarding current efforts to address meth use) for the past 12 years as indicators on its annual report card that tracks meth use and the effect it has on the community. More recently, the data have also been actively utilized by the region's newly formed Oxy Task Force. Because of this support, when federal funding ended, local stakeholders, including law

enforcement and the County of San Diego, stepped up to provide the resources necessary to maintain the project. As such, San Diego County was the only ADAM site able to continue data collection uninterrupted.

With the new funding sources, the name of the San Diego program was changed to Substance Abuse Monitoring, or SAM, but the essential nature of the program, including conducting interviews and urinalysis with a sample of adult (both male and female) and juvenile arrestees, continued, although on an abbreviated schedule. In addition, a meth addendum continued to be administered to arrestees who reported any meth use in the past 30 days and a gang addendum has been conducted since 2008 with arrestees who report any previous gang affiliation. Each interview instrument is reviewed on an annual basis with input from the project's Local Coordinating Council (LCC), which is composed of law enforcement, prevention, public health, and treatment professionals, that meet on a quarterly basis.

Data summaries are prepared annually via one-page CJ Faxes and short CJ Bulletins that highlight key findings and are easily accessible for busy policy makers and practitioners. In 2006, an additional new dissemination channel was made available with aggregate data from 2004 to the present posted to the Web (www.sandag.org). Between 2008 and 2009, 7 CJ Bulletins, 7 CJ Faxes, and over a dozen media stories highlighted the results from this project, and presentations were made quarterly to professional organizations, public officials, and community groups.

Current Methodology

Individuals arrested within the past 48 hours and booked into one of four local detention facilities in 6 of the 12 months in are eligible for study participation. As previously noted, data collection was shortened from a quarterly to bi-annual schedule due to resource availability.

Beginning in 2004, for the three adult facilities, probability sampling has been used in which all arrestees booked within the previous 24 hours are identified, the total number is divided by the number of interviews that are expected to be completed (approximately 16 for adult males and 12 for adult females per evening), and every nth arrestee is selected. If a selected individual is no longer available, then the individual who preceded him/her on the list is selected. This sampling method differs somewhat from the procedures used as part of the national protocol which involved two separate but concurrent interview shifts. However, they are similar in that both ensure all inmates had an equal opportunity of participating in the study, regardless of what time of day they are arrested or where they were housed when the interviews were being conducted. At the juvenile facility, due to smaller numbers, all eligible youth are approached for study participation, both prior to and after 2003.

Once an individual is selected, s/he was escorted from the cell and brought to the interview location. Before the interview begins, the purpose is explained to the arrestee, in either English or Spanish, including that his/her responses are voluntary and confidential. In order to protect client confidentiality, beginning in 2004, no names are recorded on any paperwork that leaves the facility, information from individuals not interviewed is not collected, and no information regarding the time of arrest or booking or the arrestee's exact date of birth is maintained. Once informed consent is obtained, the interview is conducted. In exchange for their participation, interviewees are offered a small meal or food item.

In 2008, a total of 790 adult arrestees and 164 youth were interviewed as part of the SAM program. Of those interviewed 767 adults and 159 youth (both 97%) provided a viable urine sample and completed the entire interview. Additional analyses revealed that a willingness to provide a urine sample was not significantly related to the arrestee's gender, ethnicity, age, or

highest charge at arrest. Data for 2009, which is currently being analyzed, includes interviews with 766 adults and 154 juveniles.

Recent Data Results

As previously described, data for the SAM project are summarized in short easy-to-read research bulletins and one-page summaries that are disseminated annually and available on the SANDAG Web site. The following bullets highlight some of the key findings discussed in the most recent publications.

- In 2008, 58 percent of female and 57 percent of male adult arrestees tested positive for an illegal drug, the lowest rate for both genders since 2000. In 2009, the positive rate remained unchanged for males, but increased to 65 percent for females. About half of juveniles test positive for an illegal drug each year, including 53 percent in 2009.
- Meth remains the drug of choice for many arrestees, following marijuana. While there was a spike in use in 2005, a number of indicators show that fewer arrestees are using it, that it is more expensive, and that it is harder to obtain. Despite the perception among some local professionals that an increase in heroin use would follow the spikes in meth use, or that meth use is increasing among African-American arrestees, the SAM data have not shown either to be the case.
- Additional questions pertaining to the illegal use of prescription drugs have been added to the interview due to increased concern at a number of levels. Recent analyses show that about one-third of adult arrestees have used prescription drugs illegally and that OxyContin is most frequently cited as a drug that was used in the past year. Arrestees who use prescription drugs illegally are also more likely to have used other illicit

substances and most likely to report they got it from a friend, rather than from the internet or through doctor shopping.

- Drug market questions show how arrestees obtain drugs in different ways. Heroin users are less likely to obtain the drug through noncash means, more likely to travel further to purchase it and to have a regular source, and buy it more frequently, compared to those obtaining other substances. Arrestees who obtain crack are more likely to get it in the central area of the county, to do so outside, and to make more than one purchase in one day.
- Around one in three adult arrestees have been in some type of formal drug treatment program. In 2008, 38 percent of the individuals who tested positive for any drug had received drug treatment previously and 73 percent of those who had previously received treatment were positive for any drug, supporting the view that relapse is part of recovery. Less than one in five (15%) arrestees reported that they had previously sought treatment, but it was unavailable.
- Adult arrestees who reported having a mental health diagnosis were significantly more likely to have a history of drug use and prior justice and social system contact – highlighting the needs of dually diagnosed clients and how important addressing these needs are for local stakeholders.
- Patterns of juvenile behavior related to justice system contact are highlighted in a number of venues and forums to inform public policy, including the need to focus on truancy reduction, given the high rate reported by these youth; the early initiation of gateway drug use and the use of multiple substances; the perception by many that marijuana is less harmful than tobacco; the familial cycle of justice system contact with many parents of

these youth having drug use and criminal justice contact histories themselves; and the need to be aware of issues at home for girls with justice system contact who have lengthy histories of running away.

- Data regarding the characteristics of this population, including the high percentage with histories of homelessness and visits to the emergency room for drug-related incidents, are highlighted as part of community presentations to educate citizens about the needs of this population and how not addressing underlying risk factors can increase the chances of recidivism and cost tax payers more in the long run.

Making Research Findings Relevant to Law Enforcement

Over the years, SANDAG has worked closely with law enforcement in San Diego County on the ADAM/SAM project, as well as other efforts. In nurturing these relationships, SANDAG has made it a priority to keep a reciprocal dialogue and information exchange in place so that research priorities are informed from practitioners in the field and research findings are translated into practice in an effective manner. Examples of how SANDAG ADAM/SAM information and other data have been utilized recently to impact public policy and practice include:

- Information distributed by SANDAG was instrumental in the development and implementation of the Landlord Tenant Training Program which has been used county wide since its inception in September 1996. Hundreds of property owners and property management companies have been trained in its use. The program has been used by numerous law enforcement agencies throughout the United States.
- Project Safe Neighborhoods (PSN), a federally funded grant, has been using SANDAG information (i.e., crime statistics, crime trends, percentage increases of gang crimes in

geographical areas) for several years. The PSN Executive Committee, a compilation of multijurisdictional law enforcement agencies and community groups, relies on SANDAG information to formulate ways to best place assets to deter gang activity.

- The East County Gang Commission is a group of individuals brought together at the request of the County Board of Supervisors from law enforcement agencies, the District Attorney's Office, and school district officials to develop ideas on how to deter rising gang activity. The County Board of Supervisors used information supplied by SANDAG which showed a rising trend of gang activity occurring in their districts. With SANDAG's information, the commission was able to propose and solicit funding for the formation of the East County Gang task Force in 2004.
- SANDAG released a study in 2009 which identified the prostitution of children and youth in the county of San Diego on behalf of the ACTION Network (Against Child Trafficking and the prostitution of teens in our neighborhoods Network). The ACTION Network is a group of 50 agencies that are currently fighting human trafficking and the commercial sexual exploitation of children. This study was able to quantify a significant growing issue for the region and justify the need for additional resources.
- The recent SANDAG report on "Twenty Five Years of Crime in the San Diego Region: 1985 through 2009" has proved to be a valuable resource to the San Diego Police Departments Crime Analysis Unit. With recent budget cuts and downsizing within the department, the Crime Analysis Unit has relied on the assistance and information supplied by SANDAG.

Summary/Conclusion

Despite current economic concerns, the support the SAM program has received in San Diego County appears relatively stable at this time, reflecting the fact that the effort provides useful and timely information to stakeholders at a variety of levels. In 2010, a priority effort will involve investigating new ways to share the information with officers on the street and agency staff who work directly with clients, ensuring information is provided to those who may be less aware of it and its implications.