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Illicit Drug Use Among Justice-Involved Females: Findings from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health

Methodology

Illicit Drug Use Among Justice-Involved Females: Findings from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health examined illicit drug use patterns among females and males in the full U.S. population, as well as among those arrested and booked in the past year. The analysis highlights differences by sex, race, age, and community type, offering a clearer picture of how substance use patterns vary across groups and between the general and justice-involved populations.

Data Source

This analysis uses data from the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), the nation's primary source of self-reported information on substance use and mental health among the civilian, noninstitutionalized population aged 12 and older. Data were accessed through the public-facing NSDUH online data analysis tool (DAS), administered by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). The DAS generates weighted estimates that account for the survey's complex design.

Sample and Subgroups

National estimates were produced for the full 2023 sample, representing about 283 million U.S. residents. A "justice-involved" subsample was identified as respondents who reported being arrested and booked at least once in the past 12 months. Arrest frequency ("once," "twice," or "three or more times") was collapsed into a single "any arrest" category. Non-response values (missing, refused, or not applicable) were excluded, and percentages were recalculated based on valid responses.

Measures

Drug use measures include both lifetime and past-year use. NSDUH defines "illicit drug use" as the use of marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, and methamphetamine, and the misuse of prescription pain relievers (including fentanyl), tranquilizers, stimulants, or sedatives. Misuse refers to using without a prescription, using in greater amounts, more often or longer than prescribed, or in any way not directed by a medical professional. For prescription drugs such as opioids and fentanyl, only nonmedical use is included; medically supervised, on-label use is not captured.

Statistical Testing

The NSDUH DAS automatically applies a Wald chi-square test to assess whether observed differences across groups (e.g., females vs. males) are statistically significant. These tests can be structured to evaluate female–male differences within subgroups (e.g., justice-involved vs. non-justice-involved) by recoding and using control variables. However, the DAS does not support more advanced post hoc testing (such as multiple pairwise comparisons across categories) or allow pooling across smaller subgroups. For some dimensions, such as race, the DAS provides recoded variables (e.g., SEXRACE) that enable direct female–male comparisons within White, Black, and Hispanic groups. Equivalent recodes are not available for age or urbanization, limiting significance testing in those areas. More detailed testing would require access to the restricted-use NSDUH microdata.

In the full sample, analyses were structured with sex (female/male) as the row variable and the drug use measure of interest as the column variable.

For the justice-involved subsample, arrest frequency ("once," "twice," or "three or more times" in the past 12 months) was recoded into an "any arrest" category and added as a control variable, with sex as the row and drug use as the column to directly test female–male differences.

Because subgroup estimates (such as those for people arrested and booked in the past year) are based on smaller effective sample sizes, some descriptive differences that appear meaningful did not reach statistical significance. Results for these groups should therefore be interpreted with caution.