

# CALIFORNIA HEALTH CARE ALMANAC



## Substance Use in California: A Look at Addiction and Treatment

OCTOBER 2018

# Executive Summary

Substance use and substance use disorders (SUDs) are often part of conversations, but not as frequently considered for their place in the health care system. Still clouded by stigma, substance use disorders are slowly beginning to be more broadly understood as chronic illnesses — and the health care system is (also slowly) beginning to identify, treat, and pay for them that way.

Substance use disorders are common. About 8% of Californians met criteria for substance use disorder, but only 10% of people with a substance use disorder received any type of treatment.

*Substance Use in California: A Look at Addiction and Treatment* is CHCF's first Almanac publication to address this topic. It uses the most recent data available to provide an overview of substance use and addiction in California. Topics include prevalence of substance use disorder, use of alcohol and other drugs, mortality, emergency department use, treatment, workforce, and spending.

## KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- Alcohol use disorder was more prevalent than other types of substance use disorders. Six percent of Californians reported meeting the criteria for dependence on alcohol, compared to 3% for illicit drugs.
- Substance use disorders were most prevalent among young adults 18 to 25, occurring at nearly twice the state average rate.
- Use of alcohol and other drugs often begins in adolescence. By 11th grade, more than half of California students have used alcohol and almost 40% have used marijuana.
- Alcohol accounted for more nonfatal emergency department visits than all other drug diagnoses combined.
- The number of heroin-related emergency department visits in California more than tripled between 2006 and 2017.
- California is undertaking a major effort to expand and improve its SUD services in Medi-Cal through the Drug Medi-Cal Organized Delivery System (DMC-ODS) pilot program.

## Substance Use Disorder

### CONTENTS

Overview .....	3
Prevalence .....	5
Emergency Department Visits .....	15
Deaths .....	19
Treatment .....	23
Facilities and Programs .....	29
Workforce .....	35
Spending .....	38
California Public System .....	41
Prison .....	49
Methodology .....	50
Appendices .....	51

# About Substance Use Disorders

Substance use disorders (SUDs) occur when repeated use of alcohol and/or other drugs causes significant problems, such as failure to meet major responsibilities at work, school, or home; health problems; and/or disability. Frequent, long-term use of substances can result in physical changes in the brain that may increase the likelihood of compulsive and destructive behaviors, and make it more difficult for people to recover, even when they are ready to quit.

Like other chronic diseases, SUDs can be prevented, treated, and managed. The chronic nature of addiction means that relapse is a continuing risk. However, treatment and support help people to recover from the effects of SUDs. Behavioral therapy, which seeks to identify and help change potentially self-destructive or unhealthy behaviors, can benefit people with a wide range of disorders. For some substances, including alcohol and opioids, behavioral therapy is best combined with medications that can manage withdrawal, reduce craving, and decrease the physical “reward” from substance use. Peer support is another highly valued component of SUD recovery.

Note that the term *substance use disorder* replaced the terms *substance dependency*, *substance addiction*, and *substance abuse disorder* in the diagnostic lexicon beginning in 2014. Both old and new terms are used in this publication based on the diagnostic categories in use for data collection.

## Substance Use Disorder

### Overview

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Substance use disorders are common, recurrent, and often serious illnesses, but they can be prevented, treated, and managed.

Sources: “Drug Misuse and Addiction,” National Institute on Drug Abuse, [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov); “Drugs and the Brain,” National Institute on Drug Abuse, [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov); “Treatment and Recovery,” National Institute on Drug Abuse, [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov); and Sharon Reif et al., “Peer Recovery Support for Individuals with Substance Use Disorders: Assessing the Evidence,” *Psychiatric Services* 65, no. 7 (July 2014): 853–61, doi:10.1176/appi.ps.201400047.

# Prevalence of Substance Use Disorder, by Drug Type

## California, Annual Average, 2015 to 2016

PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION AGE 12 AND OVER WITH THIS TYPE OF SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

Any Substance



POPULATION  
(IN THOUSANDS)

2,757

Alcohol



2,088

Illicit Drugs



1,068

Pain Medication



206

### Substance Use Disorder Prevalence

About 8% of Californians, or 2.7 million people, met the criteria for substance use disorder in the past year.

Six percent reported meeting criteria for abuse of or dependence on alcohol, and 3% reported meeting criteria for abuse of or dependence on illicit drugs.

Notes: *illicit drugs* includes marijuana/hashish, cocaine (including crack), heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, methamphetamine, and nonmedical use of prescription drugs. *Pain medication* is referred to as *pain reliever* in the survey and is defined as use in any way not directed by a doctor. See page 4 for further definition of *dependence, abuse, and illicit drugs*.

Source: "Table 20" in *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov).