

# 2025 San Diego County Cannabis Public Health Initiative Report

*Formerly the Marijuana Prevention Initiative (MPI)*



SAN DIEGO COUNTY  
Cannabis  
Public Health  
Initiative



Prepared by the Center for Community Research  
for the County of San Diego  
Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services

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## Introduction

California voters passed Proposition 64, The Adult Use of Marijuana Act, on November 8, 2016, legalizing the adult use and possession of cannabis. Retail sales of cannabis products began in 2018. The San Diego County Cannabis Public Health Initiative (CPHI), formerly known as the Marijuana Prevention Initiative (MPI), published previous reports in 2016, 2020, and 2021. Those reports included local cannabis-related trends to assess data and identify important public health issues. This new report presents updated trends and public health data related to youth cannabis use and documents the changes observed during the 2021-2026 contract period.

**A note on terminology:** *This report uses the term "cannabis" throughout, consistent with current public health usage. "Marijuana" is retained only in proper names (e.g., Marijuana Prevention Initiative, Adult Use of Marijuana Act) and in direct references to survey instruments (CHKS, SANDAG) that use that term in their questions.*

## Overview of the CPHI

The County of San Diego, Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services (BHS), has funded the current initiative since 2012 to reduce youth access to and use of cannabis. The initiative was rebranded from MPI to CPHI in 2022 to reflect updated terminology and an expanded public health approach.

CPHI partners with the County's Regional Prevention Providers to educate the public about the harms of adolescent cannabis use. Staff engage the community through workshops, trainings, public health messaging, and coordination of the Youth Access Workgroup and Synthetic Drug Workgroup.

The CPHI regularly reviews local-level data to inform prevention practices and identify any emerging trends within the local landscape. These data are then shared with prevention providers, law enforcement partners, parents, educators, and youth. Data are routinely reviewed from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), SANDAG Substance Use Monitoring surveys, San Diego County emergency department data, poison control data, and other local sources. Additionally, the CPHI reviews and compiles data from both the state and national levels to identify trends and track changes in youth cannabis use over time.

## Current Environment

COVID-19 and the lockdown changed the environment around cannabis access. In March 2020, California declared cannabis an essential business early in the pandemic, which, coupled with isolation and anxiety, created a financial windfall for the cannabis industry. At the same time, schools and other youth activities were cancelled or limited, leaving a gap in supervision and support for families.

Since then, the cannabis landscape has continued to evolve. The transition from storefront to virtual sales, increased delivery services, and the emergence of synthetic cannabinoids such as Delta-8-THC and THC-P have created new challenges for prevention efforts. Cannabis consumption lounges have begun opening in San Diego County, raising new concerns about impaired driving and secondhand smoke exposure. Throughout this period, CPHI has adapted its strategies to address these evolving environmental factors while maintaining focus on reducing youth access to and use of cannabis.

From 2021 through 2022, CPHI emphasized education on cannabis-related local control, youth access prevention, edible safety, perceptions of harm, and cannabis policy trends. Initiative efforts were supported through the Youth Access Workgroup (YAW), Key Leadership Team (KLT), and collaborative events with school districts, public safety partners, treatment providers, and youth organizations.

From 2022 through 2024, CPHI expanded its role to a broader public health orientation, consistent with County guidance. This included integrating cannabis information into messaging connected to mental health, impaired driving, substance co-use, suicide prevention, and general health promotion. The initiative developed or updated several countywide resources, including a cannabis resource website

and library, signage for licensed cannabis businesses, vape disposal guidelines, educational materials on edibles, concentrates, and synthetic cannabinoids, and fact sheets for community presentations. CPHI team members presented at numerous conferences at the local and national levels, and the initiative’s leadership extended to multiple statewide and national networks, including SAMHSA’s PPTC Region 9, the International Academy on the Science and Impact of Cannabis (IASIC), and the UCSD Adolescent Brain and Cognitive Development (ABCD) Liaison Committee. During this period, CHKS data show San Diego County youth cannabis use declining to one of its lowest rates in recent years (5% past-30-day use among 11th graders in 2024/25, down from 15% in 2018/19).

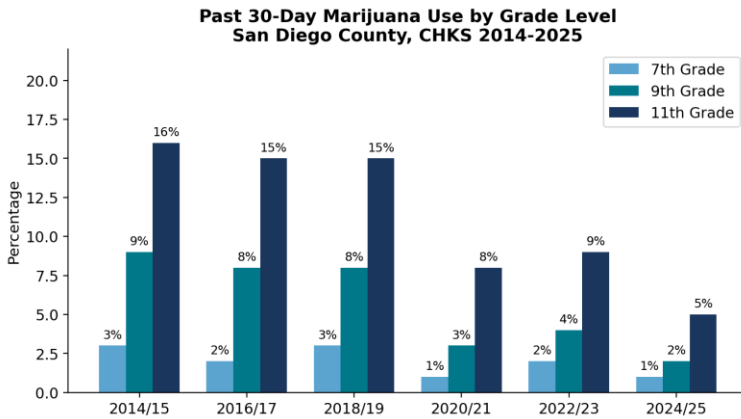
## Key Data Indicators

Given the importance of monitoring key indicators relative to the current and emerging cannabis landscapes countywide, it is important to be aware of and monitor current data and trends pertaining to marijuana use, access, and health impacts. The following pages highlight data from existing sources, useful for informing current needs and ongoing prevention strategies.

### California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS)

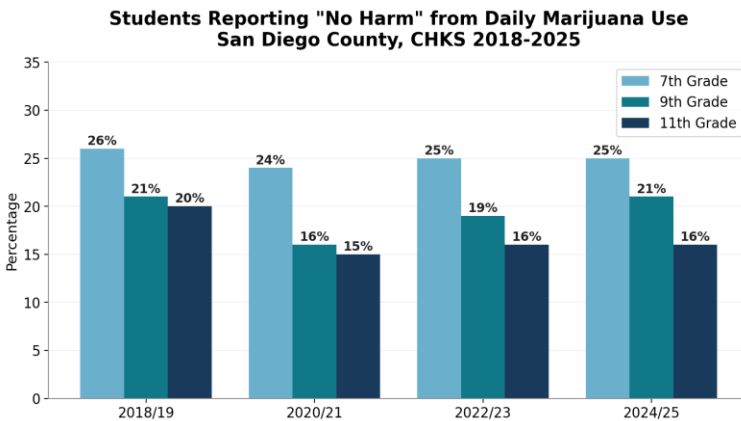
The CHKS is administered in most San Diego County school districts, surveying middle and high school youth attending both traditional and nontraditional schools.

#### Past 30-Day Marijuana Use



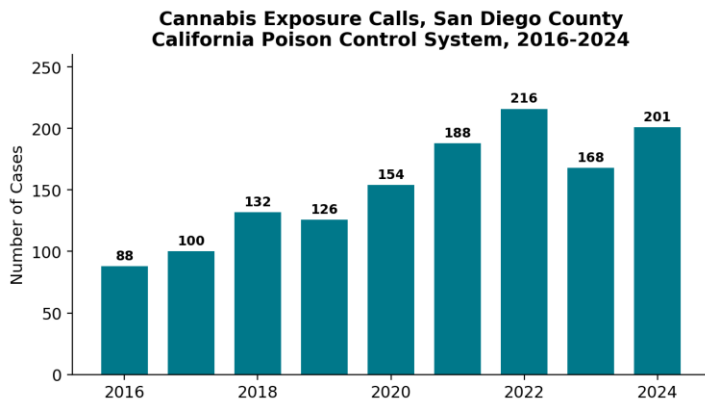
Past 30-day marijuana use among San Diego County youth has declined markedly over the long term. Among 11th graders, use fell from 15% in 2018/19 to 5% in 2024/25 - a 67% reduction - one of the lowest rates observed in recent CHKS administrations.

#### Perception of Harm



In 2024/25, between 16% and 25% of students in grades 7, 9, and 11 reported perceiving no harm from daily marijuana use (CHKS, Table A9.11). Continued education about cannabis-related health risks remains important, particularly regarding adolescent brain development and mental health.

## San Diego County Poison Control Data



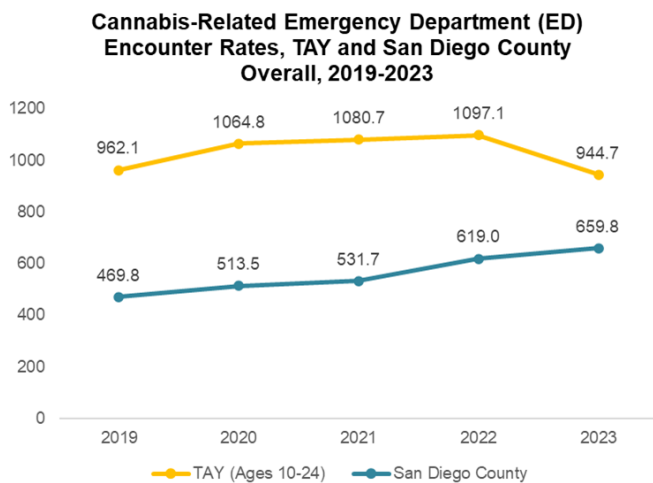
**Cannabis exposure calls increased 128% from 2016 (88 calls) to 2024 (201 calls).**

This reflects the broader increase in cannabis availability and product potency following legalization.

Safe storage education remains critical, particularly given the rise in accidental exposures among young children.

## Cannabis-Related Emergency Department Encounters

The following data present ED encounter counts and rates for any mention of cannabis use, abuse, or dependence among San Diego County residents from 2019 through 2023. Data were provided by the County of San Diego Epidemiology Unit.

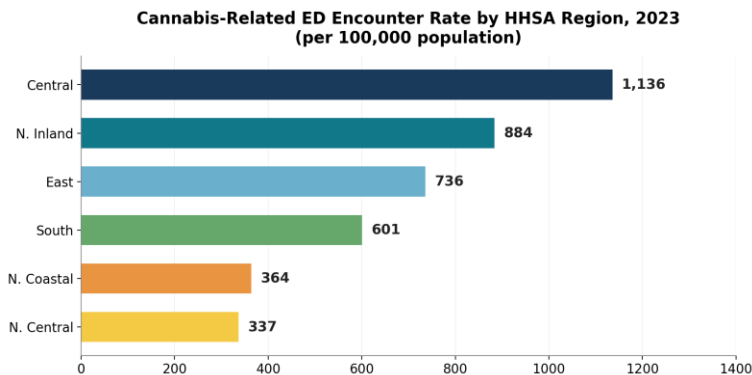


**Overall county ED encounter rates rose 40% from 2019 to 2023.**

However, youth and transition-age youth (ages 10-24) rates peaked in 2022 and declined in 2023.

This suggests a possible turning point for the target population of CPHI prevention efforts.

## ED Encounter Rates by HHS Region

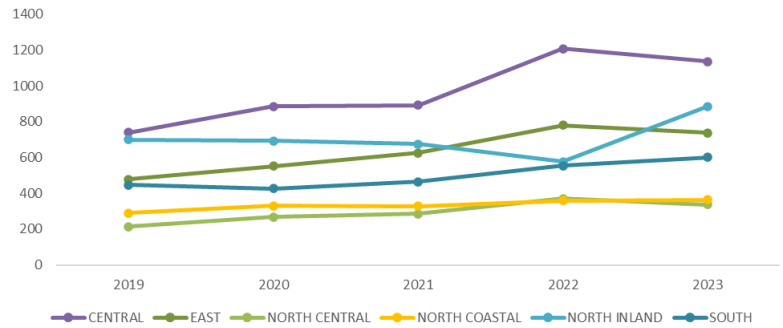


**The Central region had the highest rate at 1,136 per 100,000 - more than three times North Central (337 per 100,000).**

**All regions experienced increases from 2019 to 2023.**

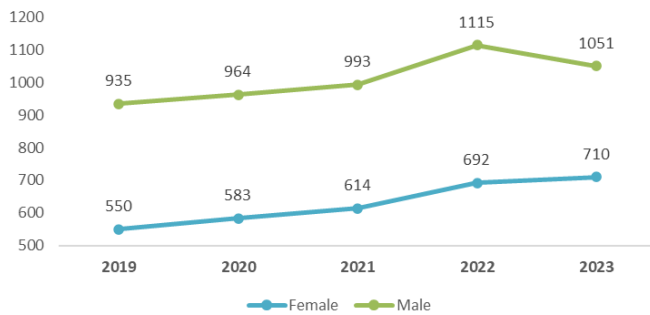
**Cannabis-related ED rates increased across most HHSA regions from 2019 to 2023, with the Central region consistently highest and notable growth in several regions, particularly after 2021.**

**Cannabis-Related ED Encounter Rates by HHSA Region, San Diego County 2019–2023**



### ED Encounter Rates by Gender, 2019-2023

**Cannabis-Related ED Encounter Rates by Gender San Diego County, 2019-2023**

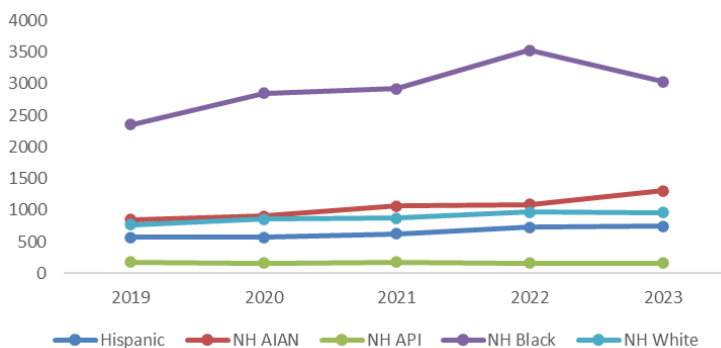


**Males had consistently higher rates across all years.**

In 2023, the male rate (1,051 per 100,000) was approximately 1.5 times the female rate (710 per 100,000).

### ED Encounter Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 2019-2023

**Cannabis-Related ED Encounter Rates by Race/Ethnicity San Diego County, 2019-2023**



**Cannabis-related ED encounter rates increased across most racial/ethnic groups from 2019 to 2023, with non-Hispanic Black individuals experiencing substantially higher rates than all other groups throughout the period.**

Source: County of San Diego Epidemiology Unit. NH = Non-Hispanic; AIAN = American Indian/Alaska Native; API = Asian/Pacific Islander. Some categories with counts <11 or missing population data are excluded.

## SANDAG Substance Use Monitoring (SUM) Survey

The purpose of the SUM survey (formerly the Substance Abuse Monitoring or SAM survey) is to identify drug use trends among the adult and juvenile offender populations to develop appropriate strategies for the prevention of drug misuse. SANDAG staff conduct interviews with a sample of juveniles arrested and booked into San Diego County detention facilities. The most recent juvenile data are from 2024 (n=41).

### Marijuana Remains Drug of Choice

**93% of interviewed youth reported ever trying marijuana. 73% reported use in the past 30 days. 68% said marijuana was their first substance - up from 59% in 2023 and 34% in 2007.**

Marijuana continues to be the most commonly used substance among justice-involved youth in San Diego County. In 2024, 79% reported that marijuana was easy to obtain, and the average age of first marijuana use was 12.6 years.

### Perception of Harm

When asked how harmful different drugs were, marijuana was rated the least harmful substance; only 22% of youth perceived it as harmful, compared to 100% for prescription painkillers and crack. However, the proportion perceiving marijuana as harmful has increased over three years: from 7% in 2022 to 15% in 2023 to 22% in 2024.

**The proportion of justice-involved youth perceiving marijuana as harmful tripled from 2022 (7%) to 2024 (22%).**

### Vaping and THC

In 2024, 85% of interviewed youth reported ever vaping. Among those who vaped, 74% reported using marijuana/THC in their vapes. Notably, 32% of youth purchased vapes directly from smoke shops, and 60% reported vaping at school. About two in five (43%) said they had gotten sick from vaping.

## Stakeholder & Community Feedback

The 2025 CPHI Member Survey (n=18) provides direct stakeholder feedback on initiative effectiveness. Results are compared to the 2022 MPI Member Survey (n=26) where applicable.

### Membership Profile

The CPHI membership reflects a dedicated and experienced group of prevention stakeholders. Among 2025 respondents (n=18), 94% live in San Diego County, 83% represent the prevention sector, and over half (56%) have participated for more than six years. Of the 12 respondents who answered the workgroup question, all participated in the Youth Access Workgroup, with 67% (8 of 12) also engaged in the Synthetic Drug Workgroup.

### Technical Assistance and Capacity Building

Of the five providers who responded to the technical assistance questions, all reported improved cannabis prevention capacity due to CPHI support, and 80% rated technical assistance as “very useful.” The most valued resources included research articles, presentations, and educational handouts in English and Spanish.

## Satisfaction and Engagement

Measure	2022	2025
Satisfied with Mission & Goals	91%	75%
Satisfied with Collaborative Efforts	79%	77%
Initiative Formed Valuable Partnerships	95%	100%
Pleased to be a Member	95%	100%
FYI Mailing List Useful	95%	100%

Source: MPI Member Survey 2022 (n=26); CPHI Member Survey 2025 (n=18).

While overall satisfaction with the mission and goals decreased slightly from 91% to 75%, key indicators of partnership value and member engagement increased to 100%. All members reported being pleased to participate and find the initiative’s partnerships valuable.

### Top Incentives for Participation

Members identified these as their primary reasons for continued engagement:

- Sharing and receiving resources (92%)
- Receiving up-to-date information and relevant presentations (92%)
- Access to data on key issues and areas of focus (69%)
- Partnership opportunities (62%)

## Community Survey Findings (2025)

The 2025 County of San Diego Community Survey (n=2,340) provides context on community awareness and engagement related to substance use prevention. While the survey does not isolate cannabis-specific messaging, the findings offer insight into the broader prevention landscape:

- 59% of respondents know where to access substance use prevention education information.
- 76% reported exposure to fentanyl awareness messaging in the past year
- 70% indicated that increased education and awareness programs would improve prevention in their community
- 43% expressed interest in health and wellness programs

These findings suggest broad community receptivity to prevention education and awareness efforts, supporting continued investment in public health messaging around cannabis and other substances.

## Local Collaboration & Prevention Efforts

Local prevention efforts continue to evolve as virtual advocacy and access to potent cannabis products become the norm. Despite recent local policy changes around cannabis storefront operations, prevention activities continue to focus on compliance, education, consumer protections, and health.

### Youth Access Prevention

CPHI delivered cannabis-prevention education to schools and youth-serving organizations across all six regions. Presentations covered access pathways, product types (edibles, vapes, concentrates), potency risks, and youth protection strategies. Through the Youth Access Workgroup (YAW), CPHI shared tools on social sources, retail exposure, online sales, and product diversion with Regional Prevention Providers.

## Perception of Harm Education

CPHI developed educational materials on adolescent brain development, THC potency in modern products, edible safety and accidental ingestion, concentrate risks, and mental health effects, including anxiety, depression, and psychosis. Regional providers used these materials for school presentations, parent education, and coalition meetings across all six regions.

## Drugged-Driving Prevention

CPHI integrated cannabis-impaired driving messages into all community presentations and educational materials. The initiative collaborated with Vision Zero, HIDTA, UCSD Transportation Research and Education for Driving Safety (TREDS), and other partners to support impaired-driving education. Co-use education addressed increased cannabis-alcohol co-use patterns and corresponding DUI risks.

## Resource & Tool Development

CPHI developed and maintained a website with a cannabis public health resource library for agencies, educators, and community partners. Additional resources developed during the contract period included:

- Public health signage for licensed cannabis retailers addressing youth access and safe storage
- GIS maps identifying cannabis businesses near youth-sensitive areas, supporting policy decisions and targeted prevention strategies
- Cannabis Retailer Risk Assessment Training Manual (developed with SAY San Diego)
- Countywide vape disposal protocol and educational materials (with San Diego County Office of Education), adopted by multiple school districts
- Edibles safety materials, concentrate info sheets, synthetic cannabinoid alerts, and youth-access tools
- Educational handouts and information cards on cannabis health risks (English and Spanish)
- Drug interaction awareness materials distributed through 17+ local pharmacies

## Community Outreach & Media Engagement

CPHI conducted presentations in libraries, community centers, parent forums, school district events, and health and safety events addressing cannabis health effects and youth prevention. Media engagement included hosting a four-part “Marijuana and Public Health” series with national journalist Jim Avila, generating public awareness through earned media coverage of youth edible exposure campaigns and mental health messaging, and publishing advocacy articles in the Times of San Diego.

## Statewide & National Partnerships

CPHI collaborated with national and statewide partners and reviewed cannabis bills and policies at the state level. Key partnerships included:

- **SAMHSA PTTC:** Participated in Pacific Southwest PTTC Region 9 cannabis education collaboratives
- **IASIC:** Engaged with the International Academy on the Science and Impact of Cannabis and the ABCD Liaison Committee
- **CDPH:** Collaborated with the California Department of Public Health Cannabis and Recreational Substances (CARS) program
- **Conference Presentations:** Presented at numerous local and national conferences on cannabis public health topics
- **Legislative Updates:** Provided partners with updates on statewide legislative changes related to warning labels, packaging, advertising, and product safety

## Workgroup Leadership

CPHI facilitated or participated in multiple workgroups throughout the contract period, including the Youth Access Workgroup (YAW), Key Leadership Team (KLT), and the Synthetic Drug Workgroup (co-hosted with SAY San Diego), addressing Delta-8, Delta-10, THC-O, and other emerging synthetic cannabinoids. These workgroups served as the primary mechanism for distributing updated materials and trend intelligence to Regional Prevention Providers.

## Regional Prevention Provider Activities

Throughout the five years, Regional Prevention Providers widely used CPHI materials during community events, school presentations, parent workshops, and outreach engagements. CPHI regularly updated partners on new cannabis products, synthetic cannabinoids, accidental ingestion concerns, high potency items, and emerging fields such as cannabis-impaired driving research.

Highlights by region included:

- **Central:** Twice-annual Cannabis Retailer Risk Assessments at all permitted retailers, Stash Your Stash point-of-sale education campaign, youth cannabis harm education presentations, smoke shop policy advocacy with the Mayor's Office, and co-led Synthetic Drug Workgroup
- **East:** Health Pathways Program presentations at Grossmont Union High School District, Delta THC awareness articles in East County Magazine, youth cannabis education integrated into school and community settings
- **North Central:** Annual cannabis retailer risk assessments, hemp product awareness campaign, Stash Your Stash technical assistance, cannabis advertising and visibility education
- **North Coastal:** 420 Remix youth event (243 attendees), DA Stakeholders Committee participation, Start Smart class integration of CPHI resources.
- **North Inland:** Public health workshops on cannabis prevention across schools and community centers, #BeResponsibletoSafeguardCannabis campaign, youth engagement as prevention messengers
- **South:** South Bay Youth for Change chapter established at San Ysidro High School, student-led community clean-up highlighting cannabis waste, DUI prevention Town Hall in Imperial Beach

## Emerging Trends

### Synthetic Cannabinoids

Synthetic THC products such as Delta-8-THC have emerged with limited information about their side effects. Many Delta-8 products sold in local retailers (smoke shops) lacked proper labeling, and some contained harmful substances, including psychedelics. The CPHI Synthetic Drug Workgroup: which is co facilitated by SAY San Diego, was established to address emerging drug trends and collaborated with local prevention partners and the Sheriff's Department which issued compliance letters to retailers.

### Cannabis Consumption Lounges

The rise of cannabis consumption lounges presents new challenges, particularly regarding driver safety and the potential for impaired driving. A cannabis consumption lounge opened in National City in early 2025, and other regions have expressed interest in similar facilities. CPHI hosted a meeting with the CDC and the County Tobacco-Free Program to share resources and discuss strategies. The CDC is now considering incorporating best practices for regulating these lounges into its guidelines.

### High Potency Products

The availability of high-potency cannabis products continues to expand. Customers can purchase and consume highly concentrated products with little restriction. Many product labels lack proper warnings

about driving, drug interactions, mental health effects, and prenatal use. CPHI continues to advocate for accurate labeling and consumer protections.

## **Secondhand Smoke Policies**

Cannabis consumption lounges and increased use of cannabis products in shared spaces have created a need for public health guidance and stronger smoke-free policies. CPHI has partnered with the CDC on this work.

## **Perception of Harm**

School-age cannabis use has declined, but 16–25% of 7th, 9th, and 11th graders still report no harm from daily use (CHKS 2024/25). Among justice-involved youth, 22% perceive marijuana as harmful — a figure that has tripled since 2022 (7%). Continued education on adolescent brain development and its impacts on mental health remains warranted.

## **Smoke Shop Products**

Smoke shops in the Central and North Central regions continue to sell products containing psychedelics, mushrooms, and hemp, raising concerns about accessibility and potential misuse. Regional prevention providers have conducted assessments and awareness campaigns to address this issue.

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*Report prepared by the Center for Community Research for the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services. April 2026.*