

CJ EVALUATION

Report from
the Criminal Justice
Research Division

Prop 64 Cohort 2:

La Mesa

Final Evaluation Report

October 2024

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Background

Passed by California voters on November 9, 2016, Proposition 64 (Prop 64) legalized specified personal use and cultivation of marijuana for adults 21 years of age or older. It reduced criminal penalties for specified marijuana-related offenses for adults and juveniles and authorized the resentencing or dismissal and sealing of prior, eligible marijuana-related convictions. To address the impacts of marijuana legalization on local communities, Prop 64 allocated a portion of state cannabis tax revenues to the Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) to administer a grant program designed to help mitigate these impacts. Since 2019, BSCC has awarded over \$31 million to local governments through the Prop 64 Public Health and Safety Grant Program. These funds have been utilized to support youth development, public health and law enforcement initiatives, often in partnership with community-based organizations (CBO).

In 2021, under the Proposition 64 Public Health and Safety Cohort 2 Grant Program, the BSCC awarded \$20,995,842 to 22 different grantees across California. Within the San Diego region, three police departments received a total of \$2,999,960 over a three-year period. Together, the San Diego Police Department, awarded \$999,960, the Chula Vista Police Department, awarded \$1,000,000, and the La Mesa Police Department, awarded \$1,000,000, collaborated with CBOs to educate students and the broader community about the risks associated with youth marijuana use. Funds were also utilized to monitor legal dispensaries and tackle illegal operations, such as sales to individuals under the age of 21.

At the onset of the grant, the City of La Mesa was forecasted to have the highest concentration of commercial marijuana facilities in the County, with an impressive 2.2 licenses per square mile. It stood out as the only jurisdiction in East County to legalize the recreational cultivation and distribution of marijuana.

La Mesa's concentration of facilities signaled the need for proactive efforts to inform youth and communities about the risks associated with marijuana use. This need is particularly relevant given that studies at both national and state levels have shown an increase in use since recreational legalization,¹ while regional data point to a decline in youth perceptions of the harms associated with marijuana.² As legalization contributes to the normalization of use, targeted educational efforts are essential to increase awareness about the potential consequences associated with marijuana consumption.

Utilizing its Proposition 64 Public Health & Safety Grant Program, the La Mesa Police Department (LMPD) conducted educational presentations to students and community members and carried out enforcement operations at local cannabis related businesses to oversee compliance. Additionally, LMPD partnered with the CBO Mending Matters (MM) to deliver drug education and intervention programs to local high school students.

¹ Gunadi, C., Zhu, B., & Shi, Y. (2022). Recreational cannabis legalization and transitions in cannabis use: findings from a nationally representative longitudinal cohort in the United States. *Addiction*, 117(10), 2651–2659; Paschall, M. J., García-Ramírez, G., & Grube, J. W. (2021). Recreational Marijuana Legalization and Use Among California Adolescents: Findings From a Statewide Survey. *Journal of studies on alcohol and drugs*, 82(1), 103–111.

² Center for Community Research (2020). County of San Diego Marijuana Prevention Initiative 2020 Report. Prepared for and funded by the San Diego County Health and Human Services Agency, Behavioral Health Services. April 2020.

Key Accomplishments

Key accomplishment #1:

After program completion, a majority of participants provided correct answers on substance use knowledge questions, meeting and exceeding the 75% threshold on most questions. Additional post-survey results revealed positive impacts on students surrounding their emotional wellbeing and support networks.

Key accomplishment #2:

La Mesa Police Department officials conducted a total of 27 school presentations on the risks of marijuana and vaping, reaching over 1,000 students and engaging 61 teachers in the process. The goal of conducting at least four classroom presentations per quarter was achieved in several quarters.

Key accomplishment #3:

La Mesa Police Department officials carried out a total of 295 inspections across 16 licensed cannabis related businesses, exceeding the goal of conducting at least one inspection per quarter.

Key accomplishment #4:

To conduct remote monitoring of cannabis related businesses, the La Mesa Police Department successfully installed a video wall in their communication center and trained personnel on its operation.

Program Description

Following the passage of Prop 64 and the subsequent increase in recreational marijuana³ cultivation and distribution, the City of La Mesa—including the La Mesa community, City Council, and La Mesa Police Department (LMPD)—raised concerns about the “normalization” of cannabis related businesses, the influence it may have on youth, and the heightened risk of DUIs. To address these concerns, LMPD utilized its Proposition 64 Public Health and Safety Grant Program to address youth prevention and intervention in partnership with Code Enforcement and the non-profit Mending Matters, a school based mental health organization.

In 2021, the City of La Mesa received a three-year Prop. 64 grant to address the project’s most pressing needs: (1) youth prevention and education; (2) parent and community education; and (3) preventing sales to minors at recreational dispensaries. The prevention component included two key initiatives: delivering drug education classes at La Mesa middle schools led by a designated LMPD Officer, and partnering with Mending Matters (MM) to provide group mental health services to high school youth.

With their longstanding experience in delivering mental health services to local high schools, the Prop. 64 grant enabled MM to expand its educational offerings, providing group mental health services to high school youth with the goal of creating a safe space for important conversations. These services targeted students who needed early intervention or who had been charged with a crime and were eligible for diversion. High school students were also referred to MM’s restorative programs when they breached a behavioral code at school (i.e. in possession, under the influence of, or distributing a controlled substance on campus). Interventions included small peer support groups and classroom presentations focused on mental health and substance use.

The enforcement component of the program was carried out by an LMPD officer whose responsibilities were evenly split between conducting drug education classes in the community and enforcing codes and regulations at local cannabis related businesses. Moreover, a crime analyst at LMPD gathered crime data within a 0.10 mile radius from these businesses to identify emerging crime trends occurring in a close proximity to each identified business.

SANDAG served as the outside evaluation partner of this project and met regularly with partners to track the progress of the grant and help address any challenges. SANDAG conducted both a process and impact evaluation to document the outcomes and successes in achieving the intended goals

³ The term “marijuana” specifically refers to the dried flowers and leaves of the cannabis plant that contain significant amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the psychoactive compound. The term “cannabis” refers to the entire plant genus, its extracts, and its many uses. For the purposes of this report, the terms are used interchangeably.

Program Goals, Objectives, and Design

The program aimed to raise awareness about the risks of marijuana and ensure compliance among cannabis related businesses in La Mesa through prevention, education, and intervention efforts. Additionally, enforcement efforts ensured legal dispensaries were compliant with criminal laws and local municipal codes. Below are the main goals and objectives, along with a detailed description of the program design and components that were used to accomplish them.

Goal 1: Prevent the increase of the use of marijuana among high school youth in the City of La Mesa.

- **Objective 1a:** Provide prevention and intervention services through Mending Matters for at least 300 high school aged children in the City of La Mesa per year.
- **Objective 1b:** At least 75% of youth receiving Mending Matters services will successfully complete program goals within one school year.

Goal 2: Prevent the introduction of the use of marijuana among middle school age youth in the City of La Mesa.

- **Objective 2a:** Provide education on the dangers of initiating marijuana use to the La Mesa middle school population.
- **Objective 2b:** Provide education to parents of La Mesa's middle school age children on the potential impact of the cannabis related businesses.

Goal 3: Ensure that cannabis related businesses are operating in compliance with criminal laws and local municipal codes.

- **Objective 3a:** Provide robust inspection and compliance monitoring for cannabis business license applicants from start through approval.
- **Objective 3b:** Provide regular inspection of businesses in operation to ensure compliance.

Goal 4: Increase the ability of the LMPD to conduct remote monitoring of cannabis related businesses (as required per the cannabis business license).

- **Objective 4a:** Install a video wall in the La Mesa Police Department's Communications Center.
- **Objective 4b:** Train staff on the operation and monitoring of the video wall.

Goal 5: Ensure the presence of cannabis related businesses do not contribute to an overall increase in crime.

- **Objective 5a:** Monitor law enforcement data for crime and disorder trends.
- **Objective 5b:** Develop response to identified trends utilizing analyses and best practices.

Goal 6: Educate parents and other community members regarding the risks of marijuana use, including juvenile use and driving under the influence

- **Objective 6a:** Conduct a robust educational campaign aimed at increasing awareness in the community.
- **Objective 6b:** Keep the public updated on the progress of the grant efforts.

Methodology

Research Design

The evaluation for this project comprised both process and outcome components. SANDAG staff were involved from the beginning of program development to ensure the evaluation accurately measured program goals and objectives, developed necessary data collection tools, and established research timelines and protocols.

Analysis Plan

Analysis was primarily quantitative, with limited qualitative analysis of quarterly progress reports to extract data related to achievements and challenges faced by program staff. To measure program goals, a non-experimental design was employed, utilizing post-tests to assess student knowledge following program participation. This approach aimed to evaluate participants' understanding of the presentation material after program completion. Participant characteristics and demographics were also recorded to provide a comprehensive overview of the program's reach and impact.

Descriptive data on law enforcement operations and activities were documented and analyzed to provide a framework for assessing changes in criminal activity surrounding the targeted entities. Statistical analysis included the use of frequency distributions and chi-square statistics for nominal measurements and difference of means tests for ratio-level data. Collected crime data were showcased through interactive dashboards, which were provided to LMPD staff. Below are the process and outcome research questions addressed in this evaluation report.

Process Measures

The process evaluation documented which program components were employed and whether interventions were implemented as planned. Data were gathered from multiple sources to describe the population served, the groups attended, services received, the type and number of law enforcement operations conducted, and lessons learned. The process evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. What were the number and characteristics of the youth served through Mending Matters?
2. What were the topics and how many educational presentations were conducted by the LMPD officer, and to how many classrooms?
3. What was the type and level of services received?
4. How many, to whom, and what topics of parental education presentations were conducted?
5. How many law enforcement cannabis related business inspections, decoy operations and code compliance checks were conducted?
6. Was the program implemented as designed and what lessons were learned?

Outcome Measures

Outcome measures focused on how effective the project was at an individual and population level. Success for the program is based on completion of a post-survey and obtaining a score of 75% or higher on knowledge questions. Population-based data will focus on changes in crimes in comparison to a similar jurisdiction. The outcome evaluation addressed the following questions:

1. Did participants demonstrate knowledge of the risks of marijuana and other substance use?
2. After participating in MM services, were there improvements in participants' attitudes towards marijuana use and resiliency to avoid use?
3. What impact did the project have on crime in the surrounding areas of the dispensaries?

Data Collection and Sources

Mending Matters post-surveys: To measure changes in youth's resiliency in preventing substance use, a post-survey was conducted with all youth who participated in and completed Mending Matters groups. The survey measured resiliency through indicators such as positive connections with others, self-reflection, and awareness of the effects of substance use. The survey also measured participants' knowledge of how marijuana use impacts quality of life, the negative effects of vaping, and signs of addiction/dependence. Data was collected using hard copies or electronically using a URL link to the survey when available.

Law enforcement operations tracking logs: To document all law enforcement operations including the type, location, and response (i.e., citations, arrests, education), data was tracked using an Excel form created by SANDAG and completed by LMPD.

Local crime data: SANDAG worked closely with the LMPD's crime analyst to monitor crime activity around marijuana businesses (specifically within a 0.10 mile radius). These same crime data (during the same time periods) were meant to be gathered from a comparable jurisdiction without legalized cannabis related businesses to pinpoint potential differences in crime trends, but that comparison was not achieved during this grant cycle due to staff shortages and reoccurring staff changes.

Program tracking logs: Classroom educational sessions and peer support group participation was tracked by Mending Matters staff and including the documentation of program goals and completion status (i.e. completed, incomplete, in progress, or declined).

Project Implementation

The implementation of this project faced several limitations that hindered the achievement of its initial goals. The prevention component, consisting of MM group sessions and LMPD presentations, faced challenges in securing access to schools due to COVID-19 regulations. LMPD presentations were also initially complicated by difficulties in negotiating the role of police officers within the classroom. Additionally, the enforcement component of the project, consisting of code enforcement and crime analysis, was adversely affected by LMPD's persistent staffing shortages, which limited their ability to fulfill their intended duties.

Prevention and Intervention Services

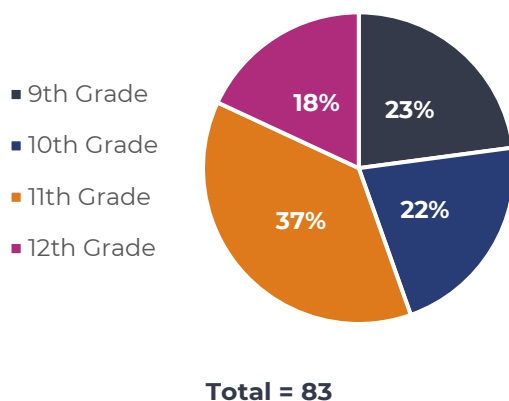
Program Description

To address Goal 1 of the Prop. 64 project—preventing the increase of marijuana use among high school-aged youth—MM aimed to provide prevention and intervention services to at least 300 high school-aged children in the City of La Mesa each year. While this numerical goal was not achieved due to challenges related to securing access to schools, participants demonstrated promising results in their perceptions of program effectiveness and their knowledge surrounding substance use.

Participant Characteristics

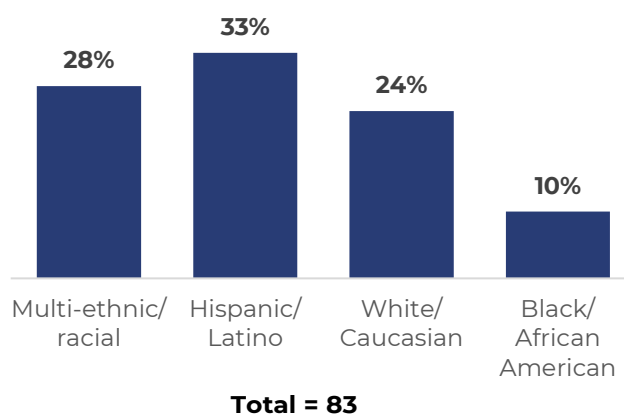
Post-survey data reveals important insights into the demographics of students and their overall responses to the program. From September 2021 to May 2023, MM provided services to 85 students. Survey data found that participants were primarily in the 11th (37%) and 9th grades (23%) (Figure 1). Over half (58%) of respondents identified as male, 41% as female, and 1% as gender non-conforming. In terms of ethnicity, Hispanic/Latino students made up the largest group, representing one in three (33%) respondents, followed by multi-racial students (28%), White/Caucasian (24%), and Black/African American (10%) (Figure 2). Other identities included Asian (4%) and Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander (2%).

Figure 1: Participants' Grade Distribution



Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

Figure 2: Participants' Race/Ethnicity

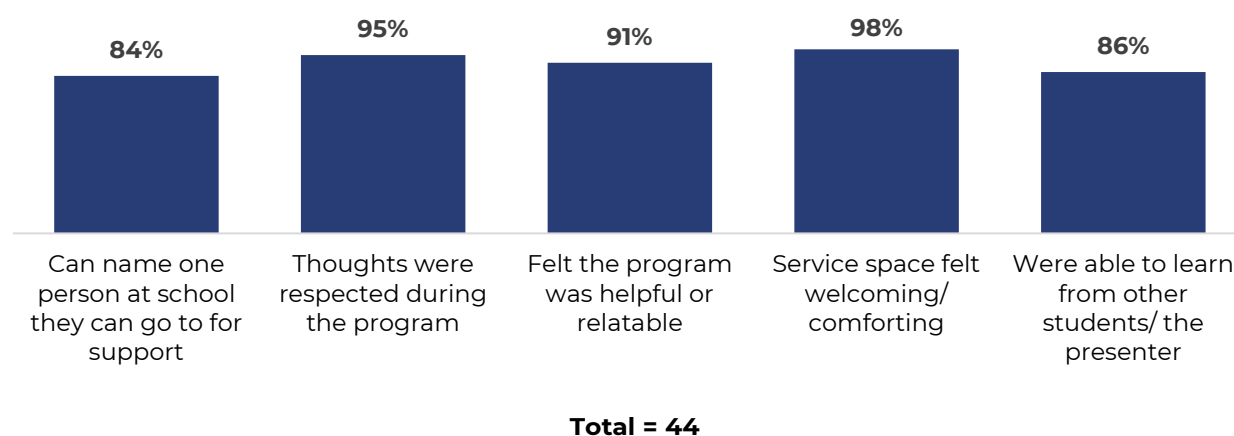


Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

Outcomes of Successful Participants

Survey responses spoke to the program's overall perceived effectiveness. Of the 44 students with valid responses, over four-fifths (84%) said they could name someone at school they could go to for support (e.g. a friend, counselor, teacher, etc.) (Figure 3). Most students felt their thoughts were respected during the program (95%) and felt the content was helpful or relatable for people their age (91%). Nearly all (98%) students felt MM offered a welcoming and comfortable space, and 86% reported feeling like they were able to successfully learn from other students and/or the presenter.

Figure 3: Participants' Overall Perception of Mending Matters Services



Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

The program's impact on emotional awareness was also noteworthy, with a majority (82%) of students reporting newfound ways to manage strong emotions like sadness, frustration or anger (Figure 4). Four in five students (80%) said that after this program, they felt a stronger understanding of themselves or who they want to be.

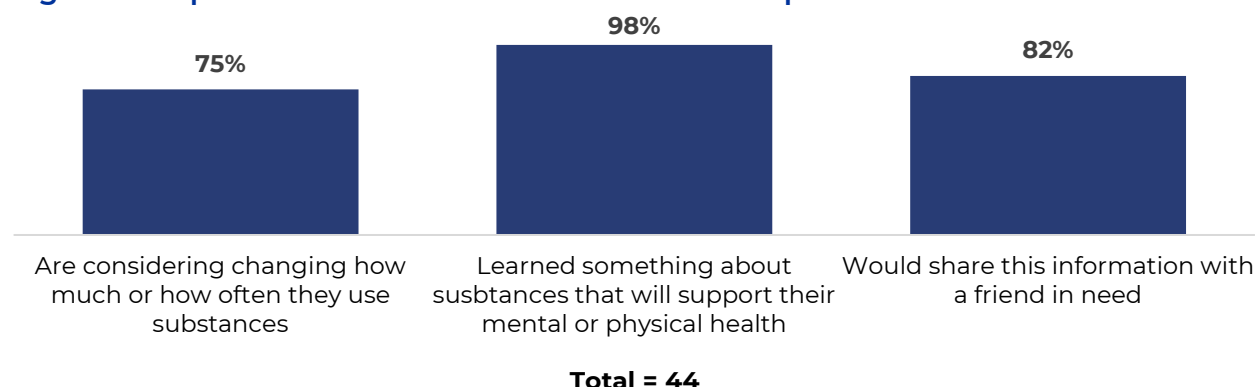
Figure 4: Impact on Participants' Emotional Awareness



Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

In regard to changes in substance use perceptions or behaviors, nearly all (98%) respondents disclosed learning something about substances that could help their mental or physical health, and three in four (75%) reported thinking about changing how much or how often they use substances (Figure 5). Additionally, most students (82%) expressed a willingness to share this information with friends who might need substance use support.

Figure 5: Impact on Students' Substance Use Perceptions



Source: *Mending Matters, SANDAG*

Lastly, the survey also measured students' knowledge related to vaping and other substance use topics. The threshold for success—as defined by the evaluation plan of this project—was a 75% correct response rate on knowledge questions, which was met and exceeded in five of six questions (Table 1). Overall, responses demonstrated a strong awareness of issues related to the impacts of substance use on quality of life.

Table 1: Participants' Correct Response Rates on Substance Use Knowledge

Survey Question	Correct Answer	Correct Response Rate	Totals (N)
What are some of the effects of Cannabis Use Disorder on someone's quality of life?	All of the above	73%	85
How many cigarettes does one Juul Pod equal?	20	98%	65
Roughly what percentage of vapes are made in China, in factories that do not have regulations or quality control?	90%	88%	85
What might you notice in someone who is becoming dependent / reliant on a substance (i.e. Marijuana, vaping, alcohol, etc.)	All of the above	82%	85
True or False? Tolerance is the reduced sensitivity to a substance, meaning the body requires more of the substance to experience wanted effects (i.e. the high).	True	94%	83
True or False? Roughly 9 out of 10 people with substance use related challenges or disorders in adulthood started using by age 18.	True	87%	83

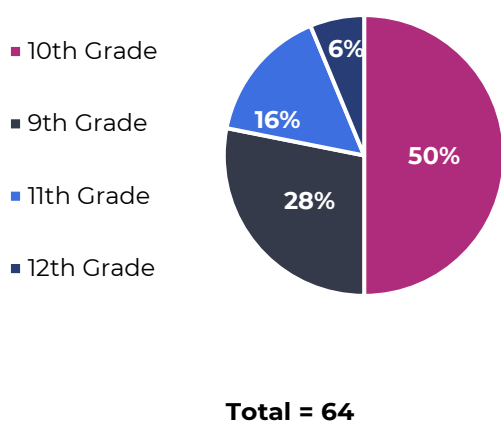
Source: *Mending Matters, SANDAG*

WAY Program Referrals

In response to increased concerns about student vaping and use of other marijuana products, Mending Matters' educational program, WAY, directly addresses the impact of vaping and marijuana on young people's development and relationships. Programming is designed to give students insight into the legal implications of substance use and provide them access to helpful resources. As part of this project, high school students were referred to WAY by school administrators when they breached a behavioral code at school (i.e. in possession, under the influence of, or distributing a controlled substance on campus).

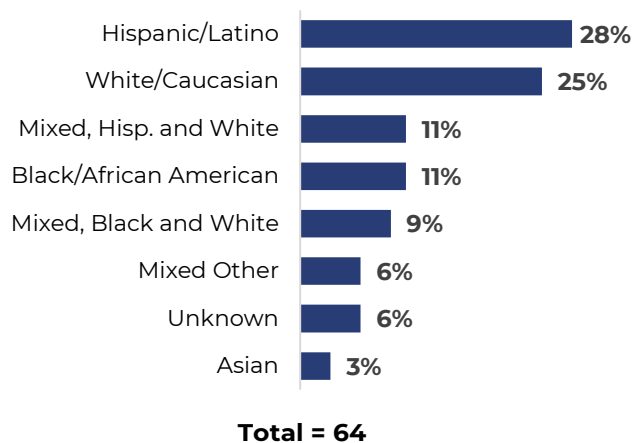
Between August 2022 and February 2024, a total of 64 high school students were referred to the WAY program. Most students referred were in the 10th grade, accounting for half (50%) of cases (Figure 6). A majority of referrals were for male students (73%) and about one in five (22%) were for female students. Two individuals (3%) identified as gender fluid, and one (2%) was unidentified. Over one in four (28%) students identified as Hispanic/Latino and one-fourth (25%) as White/Caucasian. Additional racial categories are displayed in Figure 7.

Figure 6: Grade Distribution of Referred Students



Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

Figure 7: Race/Ethnicity of Referred Students



Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

WAY Referral Reasons and Completion Rates

Overall, the program showed a high completion rate, with 70% of cases classified as completed, indicating that most referred students successfully engaged in and exited the program. Of the 30% of cases that were not marked as completed, the most common reason was a cancelled referral. Additional reasons are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: WAY Program Completion Status

Service Completion Status	Rate (%) (N=64)
Completed services	70%
Cancelled referrals	19%

Service Completion Status	Rate (%) (N=64)
Cancelled per grade level principal	5%
Cancelled program	3%
Transferred schools	2%
Unsuccessful contact	2%

Source: *Mending Matters, SANDAG*

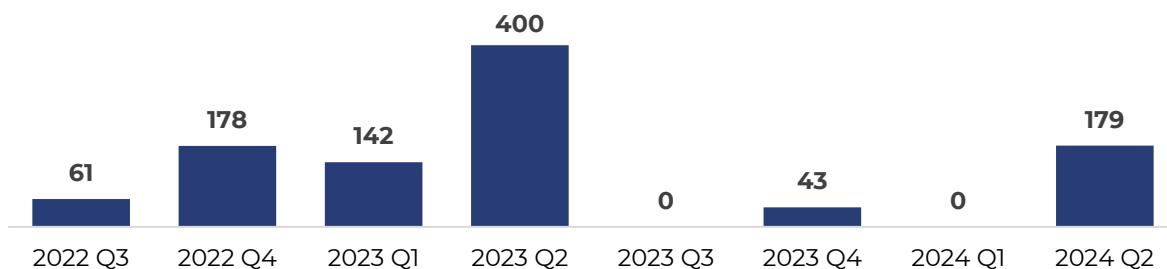
Marijuana was the most common substance leading to a referral, with more than two in three (67%) cases involving marijuana-related violations. Vaping-related incidents were also significant, with nicotine and non-nicotine vapes mentioned in over half (52%) of cases. One in three (33%) referrals involved the use or possession of THC vapes or related accessories, such as THC pens, vape chargers, or cartridges.

Educational Presentation Outcomes

Youth Presentations

Between September 2022 and April 2023, LMPD conducted a total of 27 presentations across various schools, primarily aimed at educating students about the risks associated with marijuana and vaping. Collectively, these presentations reached 1,003 students (Figure 8) and were supported by the participation of 61 teachers. Most student attendees were in middle school, with the majority of presentations (81%) targeting grades 6 through 8. A few sessions were also held for younger students in grades K-6 and older students in grades 9-12.

Figure 8: Number of students reached through LMPD's educational presentations over the course of the project

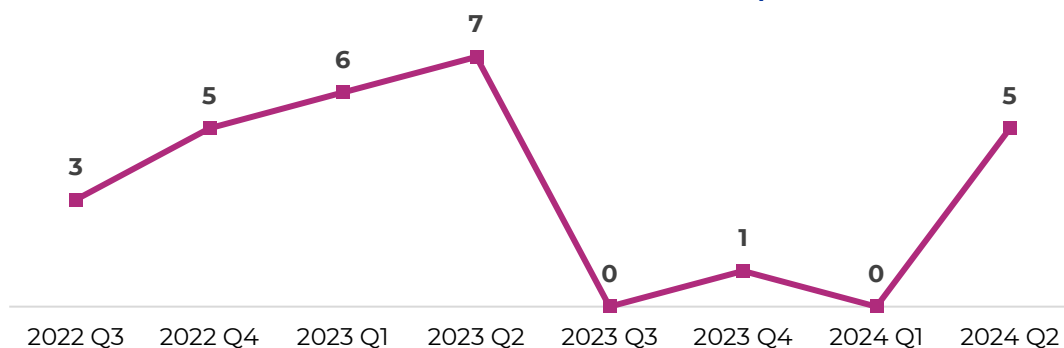


Source: *Mending Matters, SANDAG*

Challenges were minimal, with only three of the 27 presentations noting a need for additional time to cover the entire presentation material. Despite these minor setbacks, the program effectively provided information about substance use and its risks to large audiences, helping build awareness among a critical age group.

The program aimed to conduct at least four classroom presentations per quarter. This goal was achieved in some quarters, but the lack of consistency following the first half of 2023 may be attributed to LMPD's staffing shortages.

Figure 9: Number of Student Presentations Conducted per Quarter



Source: *Mending Matters, SANDAG*

Parent Presentations

One of the project's goals was to conduct at least one parent presentation per quarter for the parents of middle school students. However, over the course of the project, only one presentation was held on October 26, 2022. The session covered the topic of La Mesa dispensaries and reached approximately 10 adults. As mentioned previously, the challenges with lack of staffing hindered the LMPD's capacity to meet their presentation goals.

Inspections & Minor Decoy Operation Outcomes

Cannabis Dispensary Inspections

From July 2022 to July 2024, a total of 295 inspections were carried out at 16 dispensaries. Nearly all facilities underwent multiple inspections, with URBN Leaf businesses garnering the most visits (Table 3).

Table 3: Top 10 Dispensaries Inspected Throughout Program Duration

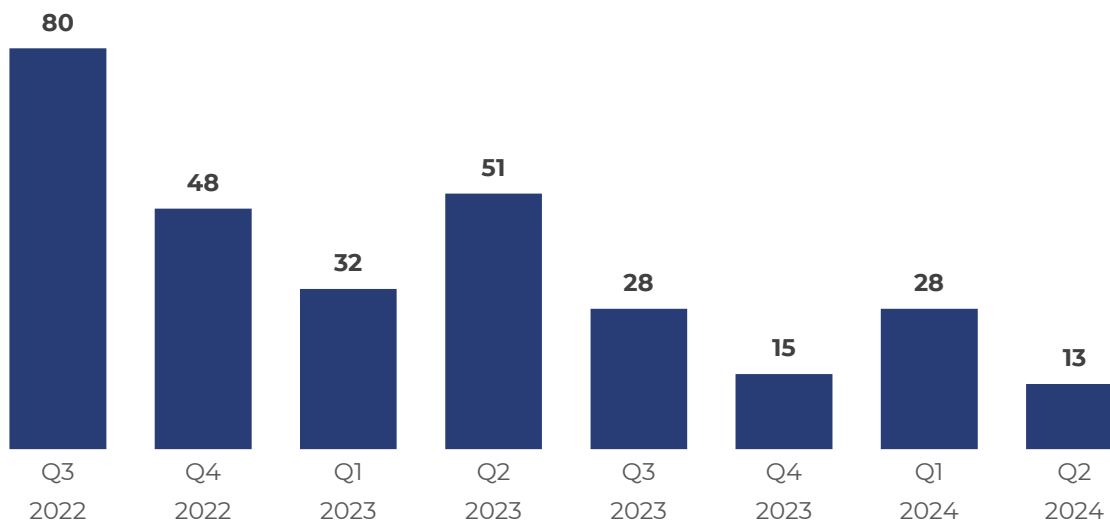
Dispensary Name	Number of Inspections
URBN Leaf (various locations)	48
Cookies	26
Lit	26
EMBR	26
Emjay	25
Backpack Boyz	24
Dr. Greenthumb	23
Wellgreens	22
The Grove	21
The Reserve	21

Source: *La Mesa Police Department, SANDAG*

The LMPD met and exceeded Goal 3 of this project, which aimed to conduct at least one inspection of each licensed cannabis related businesses in operation per quarter (Figure 10).

Though inspections became less frequent over time, the goal of conducting at least one inspection of each businesses per quarter continued to be met throughout the entirety of the grant.

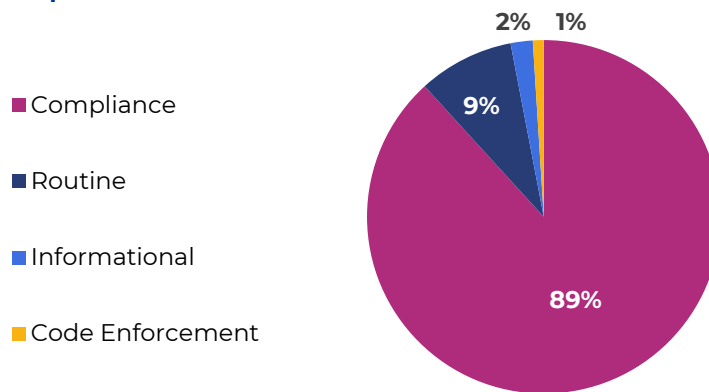
Figure 10: Number of Inspections Conducted per Quarter



Source: La Mesa Police Department, SANDAG

LMPD inspections were categorized according to the four following categories: Code Compliance/Compliance, Routine, Informational, and Code Enforcement. Most of the inspections focused on compliance (89%) and addressed aspects such as camera connections, armed security presence, and general operational compliance, ensuring that each facility was meeting regulatory standards (Figure 11). Notably, while some inspections led to the documentation of “questionable packaging” and discoveries of disconnected security cameras, no citations were issued during any of the inspections.

Figure 11: Type of Inspections Conducted



Total = 295

Source: Mending Matters, SANDAG

Minor Decoy Operations

LMPD conducted a total of 14 undercover Minor Decoy Operations to ensure compliance with legal regulations surrounding the sale of cannabis and THC-related products to minors. These operations were carried out at eleven different dispensaries. Of all operations, only one violation was recorded; a minor decoy successfully made a purchase and it resulted in an arrest. All other businesses were found to be compliant

Only **one violation** was discovered through minor decoy operations, leading to an arrest.

Surveillance Operations Outcomes

Goal 4 of the Prop. 64 project aimed to enhance the LMPD's capacity for remote monitoring of cannabis related businesses. This was achieved through two key objectives: first, by installing a video wall in the Communications Center to facilitate real-time surveillance, and second, by providing training for staff on the operation of this system. Despite initial delays caused by staff shortages, by the first quarter of 2024, work space in the Communications Center was transformed and the video wall was successfully installed. All personnel within the Communications division underwent training on how to operate the new system, with plans for future training to be integrated into the onboarding process for new hires.

Crime Trends Near Cannabis Related Businesses

Differences between program design and implementation

Goal 5 of this project aimed to ensure that the presence of cannabis related businesses did not contribute to an overall increase in crime within the community. This was to be achieved through two objectives: First, a crime analyst was to monitor law enforcement data to identify any emerging trends related to crime linked to these businesses. Data from a comparable jurisdiction or neighborhood without these businesses was to be collected and be used as a baseline comparison.

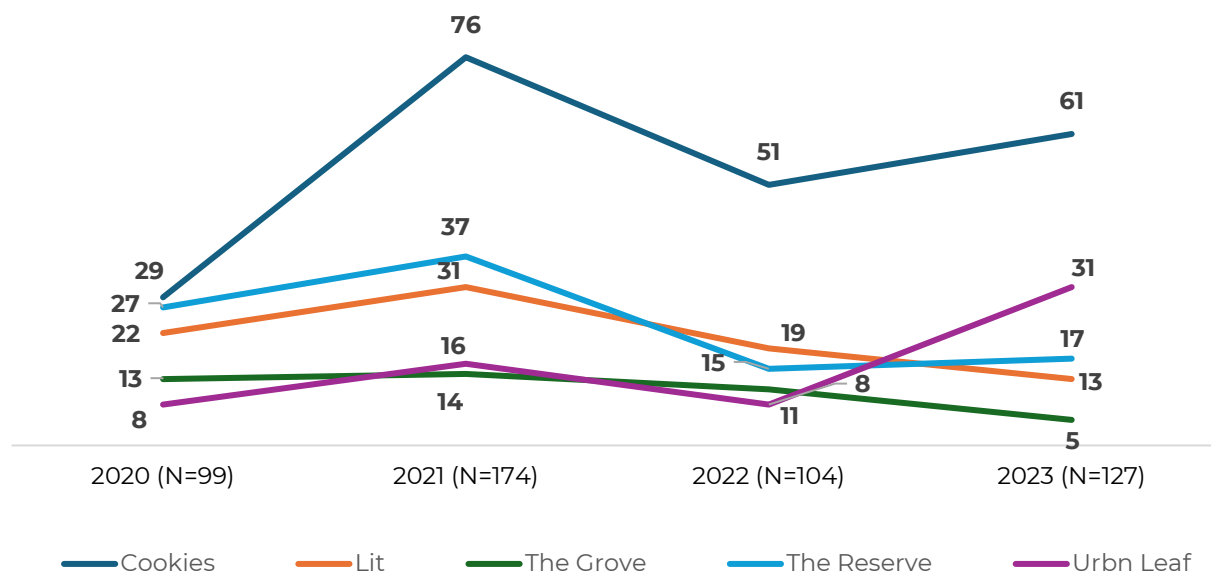
However, due to staffing shortages and high turnover rates, data collection did not proceed as originally planned, resulting in a significant delay in obtaining the data. What was ultimately collected were incidents (arrests and crime cases) that occurred within a 0.10 mile radius from 13 La Mesa dispensaries, between their initial date of operation (as early as October 2018) until April 2024.

Subset of crime data used for analysis

A total of 1,031 unique crime incidents were reported across 13 dispensaries in the City of La Mesa. However, only one business was fully operational in 2018 and only two in 2019. As a result, the total figures for subsequent years became inflated, skewing the data from that overall timeframe (rendering any year-by-year comparison misleading). For example, data for 2018 show a total of four crime incidents, which all belong to The Grove—the only dispensary that became operational that year.

To work around these limitations, five dispensaries were identified as having been operational since or before 2020, providing the opportunity to analyze five years of consistent crime data, from 2020 through April 2024. (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Number of crime incidents from 2020 to April 2024 near five dispensaries



Note: Data for 2024 is not included, as it only covers the period from January to April, when activities for this grant concluded on April 30, 2024.

Source: La Mesa Police Department, SANDAG

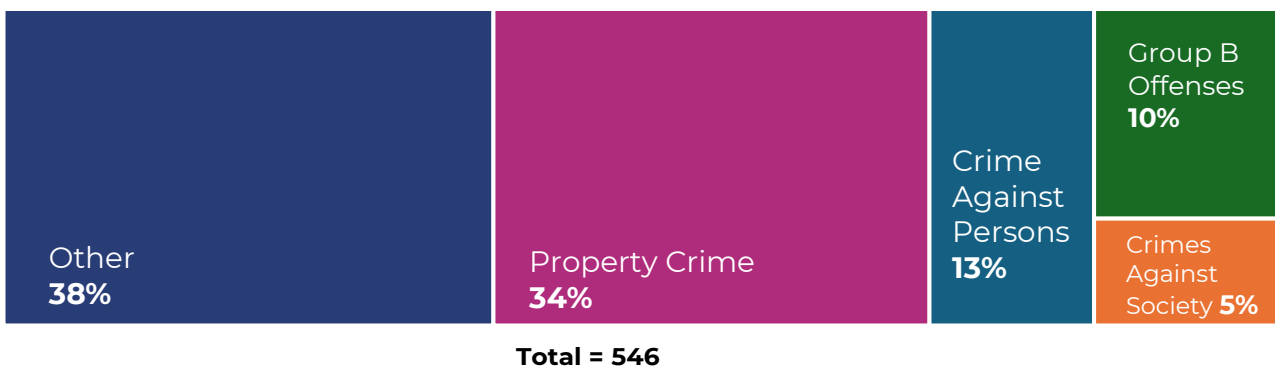
A total of 546 crime incidents were recorded within a 0.10 mile radius of these specific businesses from 2020 to April 2024. Of the 389 cases with known suspect gender, about three in four (73%) suspects were identified as male. Of cases with known suspect age (367), half (50%) were within the age range of 25 to 39 years old.

Comparing average yearly crime rates, a notable spike is evident from 2020 to 2021, increasing from 19.8 crimes a year to 34.8. Following this spike, crime counts near all five businesses fell in 2022 to a 20.8 rate and went up to 25.4 in 2023. However, Cookies, which first became operational in 2020, maintained a higher crime count than all other dispensaries observed. In contrast, both Urbn Leaf and Lit, which also opened in 2020, reported significantly lower crime levels. Future analyses should investigate external factors that may contribute to the higher than average crime count near this area, such as residential density or the presence of historical crime hotspots. Understanding the specific context is essential for accurately interpreting data implications.

Types of Crime Incidents Reported

Among the specified crime categories, property crime was the most frequent kind of crime reported from 2020 to 2024 (34%), followed by crimes against persons at 13% and Group B Offenses, which include DUI, curfew/loitering violations, drunkenness in public, & disorderly conduct offenses (10%). “Other” types of crime make up a significant portion of incidents as well, accounting for 38% of all documented events. This category includes incidents such as warrants from other agencies, mental disorders, missing or runaway juveniles, domestic violence incidents, and found property, among others. Crimes against society offenses were rare, making up only 5% of crime types across all five years (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Distribution of Incident Types (2020-2024)



Source: La Mesa Police Department, SANDAG

Of these incidents, about one in two (46%) had a case status where an adult or juvenile was arrested. Notably, male suspects were significantly more likely than female suspects to be involved in a property crime (14% versus 6%, respectively). For the rest of the crime categories, males were more likely to be involved than females (not shown).

Goal 5 Limitations

As mentioned earlier, staffing shortages and high turnover rates greatly impacted the analysis and interpretation of findings, especially for this particular goal, which required additional effort and time. Identified limitations and recommendations for future analyses are listed below:

1. Due to the lack of crime data prior to each businesses' operational date, it is not possible to establish a baseline for crime rates prior to the opening of these businesses. Future efforts should prioritize gathering data from the same areas both pre- and post- operational dates to identify possible changes in trends.
2. This analysis did not include a comparison group. Data from a comparable jurisdiction or neighborhood that has not legalized any legal cannabis distribution (i.e., the City of El Cajon) was not collected, resulting in a lack of a baseline comparison.

These limitations must be acknowledged when drawing conclusions from the data. Future iterations of this project should prioritize a more robust data collection plan to allow for more valid conclusions.

Raising Awareness Through Community Education

Community Presentations

Goal 6 of the project aimed to educate community members regarding the risks of marijuana use through a robust educational campaign. Between August 2022 and September 2023, a total of seven community-based presentations were conducted by LMPD, covering information on crime and prop 64, local dispensaries, and marijuana/vaping. In total, community presentations reached approximately 55 participants, with attendance ranging from 2 to 15 individuals per session.

These presentations targeted both residents and students, with five sessions focused on residents and two on students, including the LMPD Youth Leadership Camp and the First Responder Lunch at La Mesa Arts Academy. Presentation durations varied, from short 15-minute sessions to a 2-hour Coffee with a Cop event.

Overall, the goal of holding at least one community-based presentation per quarter was not fully achieved. Due to challenges with hiring a designated LMPD Prop 64 officer, community presentations did not begin until August 2022. Consistent engagement was maintained throughout Q3 of 2023, but no community presentations were conducted in Q4 of 2023 nor in the 2024 calendar year.

Social Media Posts

In addition to community presentations, social media posts were also used as a tool for LMPD to engage, inform, and educate the community effectively. Between July 20, 2022, and October 27, 2022, a total of six social media posts were created, covering a range of important topics, including driving under the influence of marijuana, the risks of e-cigarettes for kids and teens, marijuana consumption while driving, and practicing Halloween safety. Posts garnered considerable amounts of engagement from audiences, with a DUI post obtaining the most reactions (193), comments (65), and shares (32). Overall, the campaign successfully utilized social media to engage with the community, though efforts ceased in 2023 and 2024 due to staffing shortages previously mentioned.

“Drive High Get a DUI”
was the social media
post most engaged with
in 2022, obtaining **193**
reactions and
potentially reaching
11,082 people.

Summary

The City of La Mesa Proposition 64 Public Health & Safety Grant Program was utilized to attempt to minimize the impact of the presence of cannabis related businesses on La Mesa's youth and the city's overall crime rates. To achieve this, LMPD partnered with Mending Matters to deliver drug education and intervention programs to La Mesa high school students. Additionally, LMPD appointed an officer to oversee all Prop 64 related duties, including ensuring legal compliance among cannabis related businesses, implementing evidence-based outreach and education at middle schools, conducting parent/community education, overseeing social media messaging, and procuring monitoring equipment for the Communication Center.

Success was defined as meeting all grant quarterly obligations and demonstrating that the set goals and objectives were met. It was measured by fulfilling the required school presentations, on-campus discussions, parental presentations, and Mending Matters services provided. It also meant establishing a positive working relationship with legal cannabis dispensaries, holding them to the appropriate standards, and completing enforcement operations that did not yield any violations.

Goal 1: Prevent the increase of the use of marijuana among high school youth in the City of La Mesa.

- Despite not reaching the target of serving at least 300 students on an annual basis due to school access challenges, Mending Matters positively impacted 85 students in group classes from September 2021 to May 2023, and 64 students in their WAY program between August 2022 and February 2024.
- The program exceeded the 75% threshold for knowledge questions in five of six topics. Post-survey results revealed strong perceptions of program effectiveness, with a majority of students reporting they learned something beneficial for their mental or physical health, felt safe in the support groups, and considered changing their substance use habits.
- Additionally, the WAY program achieved a successful completion rate of 70% from all referrals.

Goal 2: Prevent the introduction of the use of marijuana among middle school age youth in the City of La Mesa.

- LMPD conducted 27 total presentations in schools on the risks of marijuana and vaping, reaching over 1,000 students. The program aimed to conduct at least four classroom presentations per quarter, a target that was successfully met in several quarters, particularly in the first half of the grant cycle.
- Efforts to engage parents fell short, with only one presentation conducted. This points to an area for potential improvement in future initiatives.

Goal 3: Ensure that cannabis related businesses are operating in compliance with criminal laws and local municipal codes.

- From July 2022 to July 2024, a total of 295 inspections were carried out at 16 dispensaries, with a majority of inspections focusing on compliance and ensuring that each facility was meeting regulatory standards. No citations were issued at any of these inspections.

- A total of 14 undercover operations were conducted across 11 dispensaries, with just one operation leading to an arrest.

Goal 4: Increase the ability of the LMPD to conduct remote monitoring of cannabis related businesses (as required per the cannabis business license).

- Despite initial delays caused by staff shortages, the video wall within the LMPD's Communications Center was successfully installed by the first quarter of 2024.
- Communications division personnel received proper training on the new system, and future training will be incorporated into the onboarding process for new hires.

Goal 5: Ensure the presence of cannabis related businesses do not contribute to an overall increase in crime.

- Data collection for this goal faced major challenges. Most legal dispensaries observed for the purpose of this project did not become fully operational until 2020. Moreover, data in the immediate vicinity of these businesses was not collected prior to the establishment of each business. Consequently, pre and post crime rate changes could not be analyzed.
- A more focused analysis on five (of 13) dispensaries revealed 546 crime incidents from 2020 to April 2024, with a significant rise in crime from 2020 to 2021.

Goal 6: Educate parents and other community members regarding the risks of marijuana use, including juvenile use and driving under the influence.

- From August 2022 to September 2023, LMPD held seven presentations for about 55 participants, but the goal of quarterly sessions was not met due to hiring delays.
- While social media efforts in 2022 garnered strong engagement, these initiatives ceased in the second half of 2023 and into 2024.

Final Takeaways

The Mending Matters program effectively impacted students, achieving high knowledge retention and positive perceptions regarding mental and physical health and pointing to the program's positive influence among La Mesa students. Additionally, the La Mesa Police Department successfully conducted numerous school presentations, reaching over 1,000 middle school students. However, limited parental engagement highlights an area for improvement in future outreach strategies.

Enforcement operations revealed that licensed cannabis related businesses were generally compliant with legal regulations, as indicated by 295 inspections with no citations given. The successful installation of a monitoring system within the La Mesa Police Department for monitoring cannabis businesses also demonstrates fulfillment of project goals.

Along with the successes of this project, there were many challenges in data collection that hindered a thorough analysis of crime trends linked to cannabis related businesses, underscoring the need for better comparison methodologies to fully understand their impact on communities. Moreover, the limited number of community presentations and the premature discontinuation of social media outreach efforts signal the need for more consistent and comprehensive education initiatives to effectively inform the public about marijuana use risks.

Additionally, while the initial plan for this project included the administration of client satisfaction surveys, their implementation was overlooked. This restricts our understanding of the program's individual impacts on the people it served and underscores the importance of gathering feedback in future project iterations.

Additional Research Needed Amid Ongoing Challenges

As Proposition 64 continues to evolve in its implementation, areas of research warrant further exploration to ensure that the goals of youth prevention, public health, and community safety are fully addressed.

One of the most pressing concerns is the decline in youth perception of the risks of marijuana use, coupled with the rise of high-potency consumption methods, such as vaping and dabbing. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of current educational strategies and explore why high-potency products are particularly appealing to young users. Studies from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) suggest that the potency of THC in marijuana products has steadily increased, which raises concerns about the potential long-term health effects on youth.

Additionally, illegal cannabis dispensaries remain a persistent issue despite the success of enforcement operations. It is essential to understand what factors contribute to the resilience of these illegal operations, such as economic incentives and social networks that support their existence. Research from the California Bureau of Cannabis Control highlights the complexity of enforcing cannabis regulations in an evolving legal landscape. Exploring enhanced regulatory measures or community-based approaches to shutting down illegal operations could provide new strategies for addressing this challenge.⁴

⁴ California Bureau of Cannabis Control, 2024, Cannabis Licensing and Enforcement <https://bcc.ca.gov>