DPS
Governor's Crime Commission
NC DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Prevalence of Drug Offenses in North Carolina, 2019-2022

Summary

More than one in seven criminal offenses reported between 2019 and 2022 in North Carolina was a drug offense, according to reports submitted by state and local law enforcement agencies to the National Incident-Based Reporting System, or NIBRS. The Criminal Justice Analysis Center analyzed these reports and found the following:

- 14% of all NIBRS incidents during the four-year period included at least one drug offense

- 52% of all incidents where a drug offense was reported occurred on a street, highway, alley or sidewalk

- 81% of all drug/narcotic offenses during the four-year period involved possessing or concealing contraband

- Marijuana was the most reported drug type, appearing in 59% of all drug/narcotic offenses

- At least one of five drug types (marijuana, methamphetamine, opioids/other narcotics, crack cocaine and cocaine) were present in 93% of all drug/narcotic offenses

- Between 16% and 19% of all incidents include more than one drug type

Methodology

The National Incident Based Reporting System is the comprehensive reporting system developed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and voluntarily used by law enforcement agencies to convey incidents that involve a criminal offense within their jurisdictions. North Carolina became NIBRS-certified in 2019, which means submitted data met specified criteria. One of the criteria for state certification is the percentage of the population covered by reporting agencies. In 2019, 89% of North Carolina's population was covered by reporting law enforcement agencies, and coverage increased to 97% in 2021.[1]

NIBRS collects data by the incident, which is defined as one or more offenses committed by the same offender or offenders at the same time and place. There are 38 crime categories defined by offense in NIBRS; 28 are more serious offenses, referred to as Group A, and the remaining 10 categories contain less serious offenses. One of the Group A categories of criminal offenses reported is drug/narcotic violations.
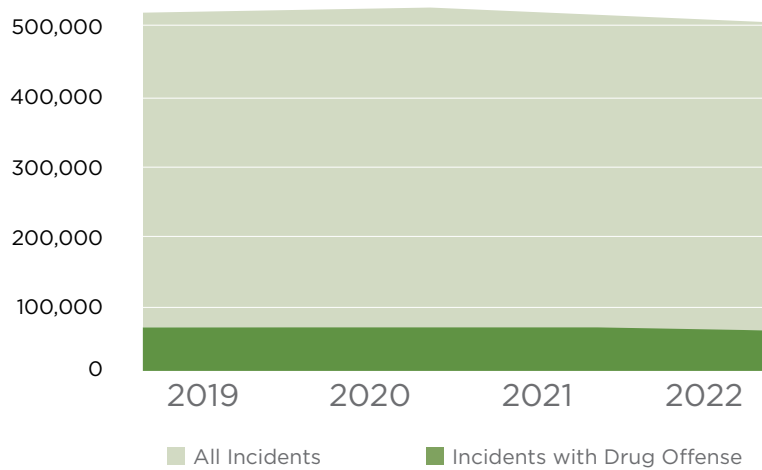
NIBRS and Drugs in North Carolina

To put the prevalence of drug offenses into perspective, it is important to understand the full picture of all NIBRS incidents and offenses reported in North Carolina during this timeframe. From 2019 to 2022, NIBRS collected 2,041,166 incidents from law enforcement in North Carolina. Of those, 278,141 (14%) included at least one drug offense. Figure 1 shows the distribution of drug offenses across all NIBRS incidents by year compared to the number of total incidents. Year-by-year variations in reporting and preliminary reporting for 2022 did not have a significant effect on the overall trends reported to NIBRS. Going forward, if a figure is not broken down by year, the numbers in the figure will show all four years combined.

[1] The NIBRS data for 2022 is preliminary so coverage rates have not been calculated.

It is important to note that every incident reported to NIBRS must have at least one reported offense. However, one incident can include multiple offenses. Out of the 278,141 incidents that include one or more drug offenses, the majority (86%) include no other reportable criminal offenses. This is comparable to all NIBRS offenses, as 90% of all non-drug offenses occur exclusively within an incident.

Figure 1: Incidents that Include a Drug Offense by Year

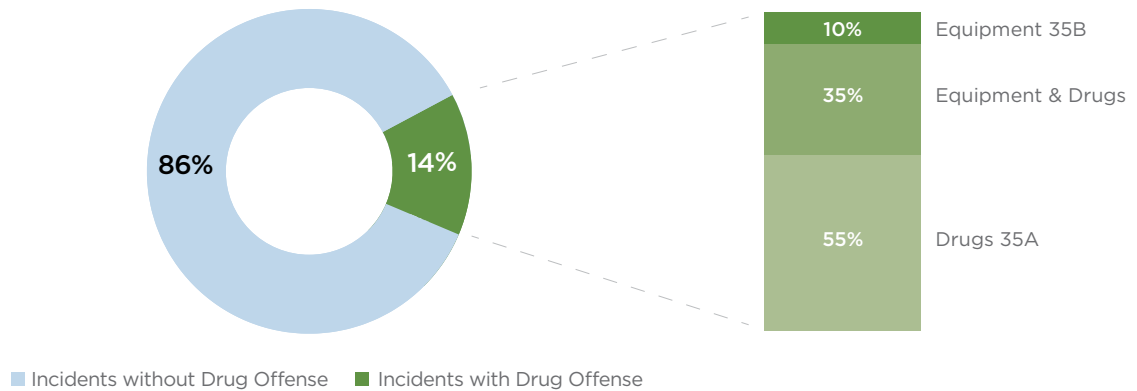Legend: ■ All Incidents ■ Incidents with Drug Offense

Drug Incident Breakdown

There are two distinct Group A offenses that can be reported in the drug/narcotic category: drug/narcotic violations and drug equipment violations. According to NIBRS, a drug/narcotic violation (35A) is defined as "the unlawful cultivation, manufacture, distribution, sale, purchase, use, possession, transportation, or importation of any controlled substance". Additionally, a drug equipment violation (35B) is defined as "the unlawful manufacture, sale, purchase, possession, or transportation of equipment or devices utilized in preparing and/or using drugs or narcotics."[2] For drug offense reporting, an incident can include either a 35A offense, a 35B offense, or both offenses.

Of the percentage of incidents that include at least one drug offense, the majority (55%) only include a drug/narcotic offense. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of incidents that include drug offenses.

Figure 2: 2019-2022 Incidents by Drug Offense
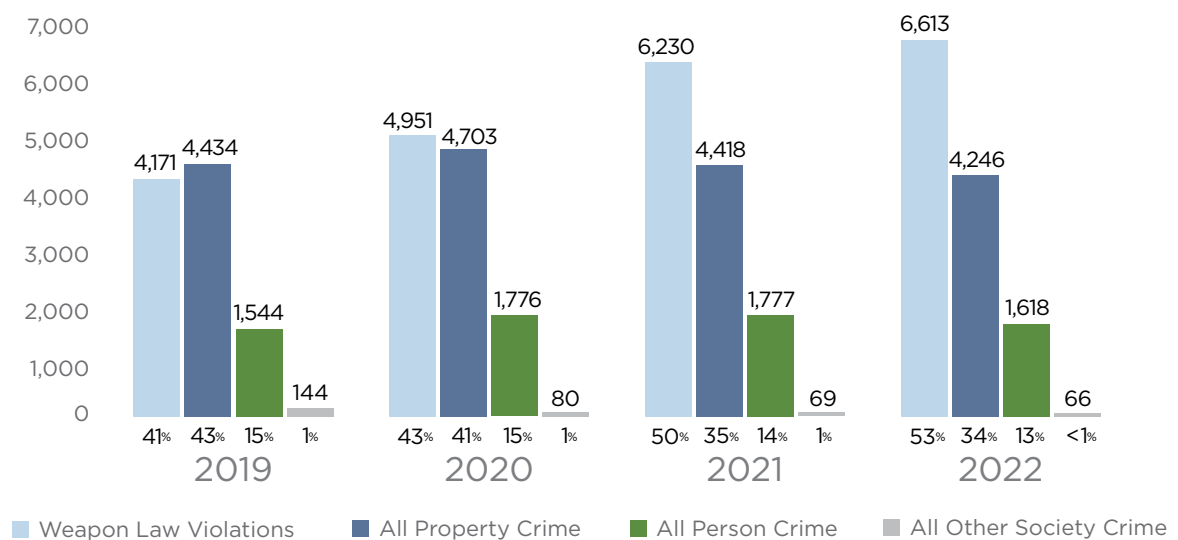

Legend: ■ Incidents without Drug Offense ■ Incidents with Drug Offense

[2] 2021.1 National Incident-Based Reporting System User Manual. Federal Bureau of Investigation—Criminal Justice Information Services Division; 2021.

Co-Offenses

As previously mentioned, most incidents have only one offense. A co-offense is any offense that exists alongside another in the same incident. For purposes of this JAR, a co-offense refers to any offense that exists within an incident where a drug offense is also present. Fourteen percent of incidents during the reporting period where a drug offense exists were identified as including at least one other offense. Weapon law violations were the most reported co-offense to any drug offense, accounting for between 41% and 53% of co-offenses for any given year in the reporting period. For all years combined, weapon law violations accounted for a higher percentage of co-offenses than all property crimes combined, or all person crimes combined. Figure 3 shows the distribution of various co-offenses. The years are broken out for the study period. There has been an increase of weapons law violations as a co-offense with drug offenses, from 4,171 in 2019 to 6,613 in 2022.

Figure 3: Most Reported Co-Offenses

Legend: Weapon Law Violations | All Property Crime | All Person Crime | All Other Society Crime

2019: 4,171 (41%), 4,434 (43%), 1,544 (15%), 144 (1%)
2020: 4,951 (43%), 4,703 (41%), 1,776 (15%), 80 (1%)
2021: 6,230 (50%), 4,418 (35%), 1,777 (14%), 69 (1%)
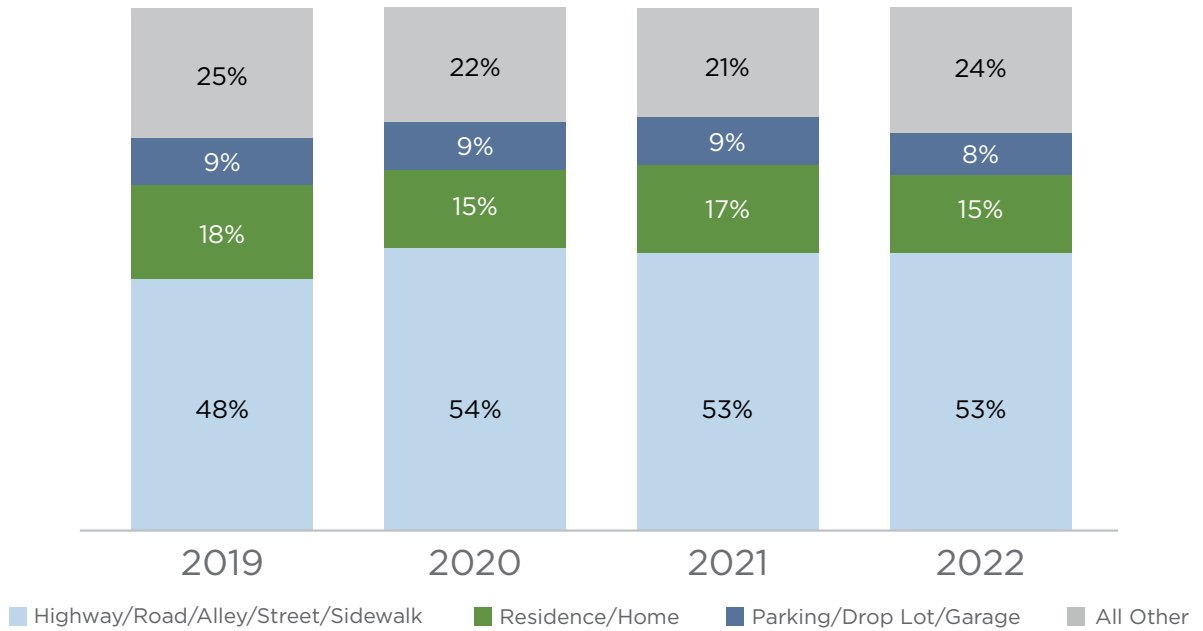2022: 6,613 (53%), 4,246 (34%), 1,618 (13%), 66 (<1%)

Location Analysis

The location of an offense is reported by law enforcement in the NIBRS data. For the purposes of this JAR, only one location per incident was used for analysis, even if the incident contained two drug offenses. In less than 1% of incidents, two drug offenses were reported and each were reported at different locations.[3]

For each year in the period, about half of all incidents where a drug offense was reported occurred on a street, highway, alley or sidewalk followed by 16% occurring at a residence or home. Figure 4 displays locations reported for a drug offense by year.

[3] In these cases, the location for the 35A – Drug/Narcotic Violation was used for analysis purposes.

Figure 4: Most Reported Locations by Year

	2019	2020	2021	2022
All Other	25%	22%	21%	24%
Parking/Drop Lot/Garage	9%	9%	9%	8%
Residence/Home	18%	15%	17%	15%
Highway/Road/Alley/Street/Sidewalk	48%	54%	53%	53%

■ Highway/Road/Alley/Street/Sidewalk   ■ Residence/Home   ■ Parking/Drop Lot/Garage   ■ All Other
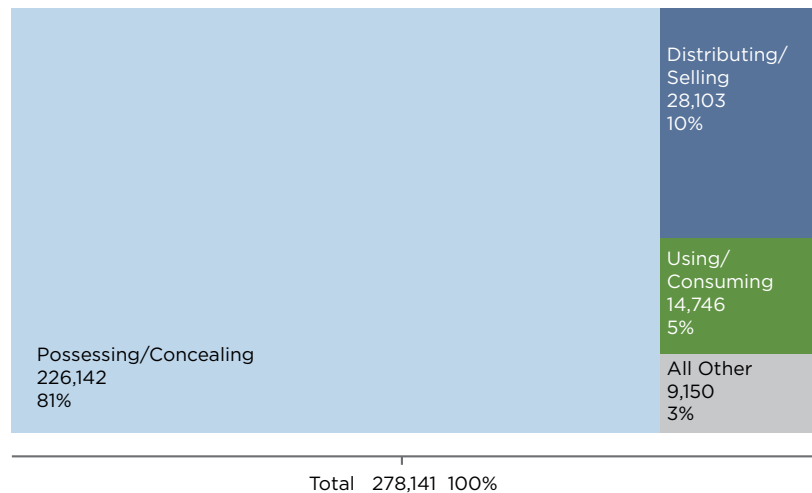
Criminal Activity

For each drug offense reported in NIBRS, a criminal activity type is mandatory. This data element indicates the criminal activity of the offenders – what they were doing with the drug or equipment – for the associated offense. Up to three criminal activity types can be selected per offense. For this JAR, only one criminal activity was counted per offense due to the small number of offenses where more than one activity was reported.[4]

Across all four years, approximately 80% of all drug/narcotics offenses indicated that possessing/concealing was the primary criminal activity. Overall, 97% of all drug/narcotics offenses reported showed that the primary criminal activities were either possessing/concealing, distributing/selling, or using/consuming. Figure 5 shows the reported criminal activity types for drug offenses.

Figure 5: Reported Criminal Activity Types for Drug Offenses, 2019-2022

Possessing/Concealing
226,142
81%

Distributing/
Selling
28,103
10%

Using/
Consuming
14,746
5%

All Other
9,150
3%

Total   278,141   100%

[4] In cases where "Possessing/Concealing" and a second activity were both reported, the activity that was counted for analysis was the other reported activity. In all other instances where more than one activity was reported, the first reported activity was counted.
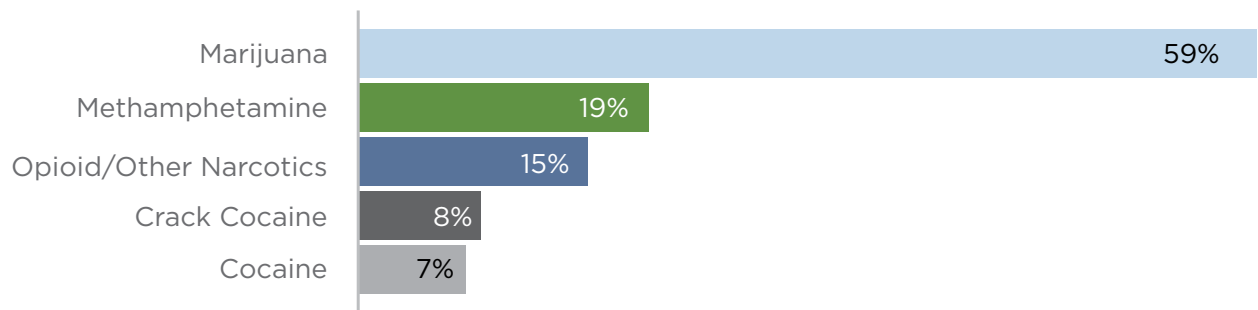
Suspected Drug Types

When reporting a drug/narcotic violation where drugs or narcotics were reported by law enforcement, a suspected drug type is required. Up to three different drug types can be reported in a single incident. In the case where more than three drug types are seized, agencies are to report "the two most important" drug types and the remaining drug types should all be reported as a single entry labeled "Over Three Drug Types".[5]

Marijuana was the most common drug type reported in NIBRS. More than half of all incidents (59%) with a drug/narcotic offense reported marijuana. Of the 146,779 offenses where marijuana was present in the four-year period, marijuana was the only drug type reported 80% of the time, which represents approximately 40% of all drug offenses. Figure 6 shows the percentage of drug offenses in which each of the most prevalent drug types are involved.[6]

It's important to note that the numbers in the graph add up to more than 100% because multiple drug types can be reported in one incident. In 16-19% of incidents in any year in the period, an incident had two or more drug types reported.

Figure 6: Percentage of Drug/Narcotic Offenses That Involve Each Drug Type

Drug Type	Percentage
Marijuana	59%
Methamphetamine	19%
Opioid/Other Narcotics	15%
Crack Cocaine	8%
Cocaine	7%

Conclusion

This analysis offers insight into the drug offenses reported in North Carolina and can be used to inform operational decisions that could benefit law enforcement efforts. For example, the analysis indicates an increase in the proportion of weapon law violations as co-offenses from 2019 to 2022. This information supports the situational awareness for officers in the field. Also, it may be important to learn that a significant portion of drug offenses (about 40%) were for possession of solely marijuana.

The data presented in this publication represents the best data set available at the time of this publication, but it is always important to consider the limitations of a data set. Some considerations for this data are:

- the prevalence of drugs portrayed is based solely on events reported in NIBRS,
- NIBRS data-collection specifications define the data that is available and
- variations may occur across jurisdictions in the way data is collected and entered.

[5] 2021.1 National Incident-Based Reporting System User Manual. FBI – Criminal Justice Information Services Division; 2021.

[6] The combined data are presented because there was only about 1% variation from 2019 to 2022 which may have been influenced by an increase in agency reporting; 89% of jurisdictional coverage in 2019 to 97% in 2021.