

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Psychotropic Substance Abuse and Actions Taken to Combat the Problem

PURPOSE

This paper gives an overview of the psychotropic substance abuse situation in Hong Kong. It also outlines the policies and actions that Government has been adopting to tackle the problem.

PSYCHOTROPIC SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The Global Trend

2. In the past years, the increased trend of psychotropic substance abuse has posed a threat to the social and public health fabrics of communities worldwide. Psychotropic substances are commonly referred to as chemicals or synthetic drugs, in particular amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS), that affect the functioning of the central nervous system. In the 1990's, the United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs already noted a global upward trend in the illicit manufacture and abuse of ATS.

The Hong Kong Situation

3. With the spread of the rave culture and the emergence of the so called "club drugs" or "party drugs", Hong Kong was not immune from the global upsurge of psychotropic substance abuse. According to the statistics of the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA), the number of reported psychotropic substance abusers started to rise in 1993 and reached its peak in 2001. This rising trend was however reversed in 2002, with the number of reported psychotropic substance abusers falling from 6 022 in 2001 to 5 516 in 2002, representing a decrease of 8.4% (Annex A).

Profile of Abusers

4. Among the 5 516 psychotropic substance abusers reported in 2002, 77% of them were male and 41% aged under 21. About 61% had

previous convictions, 43% were unemployed, 37% had full-time jobs, and 10% were still in school. The average age was 25. In 2001, ketamine overtook “ecstasy” to become the most commonly abused psychotropic substance and continued to top the list in 2002 (abused by 16.8% of the abusers), followed by “ecstasy” (8.6%), cannabis (8.1%) and triazolam/midazolam (7.5%). The most common reason given for the abuse of psychotropic substances was peer influence (47.6%), followed by curiosity (37.3%), and seeking of euphoria or sensory satisfaction (36.1%) (Annexes B to D).

ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM

Task Force on Psychotropic Substance Abuse

5. To tackle the then rising trend of psychotropic substance abuse, the Government set up the Task Force on Psychotropic Substance Abuse (the Task Force) in early 2000. With a cross-sectoral membership of experts from various fields, including voluntary agencies, professional bodies and government departments, the objective of the Task Force was to map out a comprehensive strategy to tackle the problem of psychotropic substance abuse, especially among young people.

6. The Task Force completed its work and published a report in June 2002 (Annex E). The recommendations of the Task Force, encompassing the five areas of legislation and law enforcement, preventive education and publicity, treatment and rehabilitation, external cooperation, and research provided a comprehensive framework for guiding the formulation and implementation of specific measures to tackle the problem of psychotropic substance abuse. Some of the more urgent recommendations had already been put in place prior to the release of the Task Force’s report. The remaining recommendations are being followed up by the Government, with regular progress reports made to the Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) and its sub-committees.

Legislation and Law Enforcement

7. On the legislative front, the Government has put in place an effective legislative and regulatory regime to provide stringent control over the import, export, manufacture, sale and supply of narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and precursor chemicals. The related

legislation and control regimes are constantly reviewed to ensure that they are up-to-date and effective vis-à-vis the changing drug abuse and trafficking trends.

8. Noting the abuse potential of ketamine and gamma-hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) and as recommended by the Task Force, legislative amendments were made in December 2000 and October 2001 respectively to put the two substances under stringent control under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (Cap. 134). The early interventions have helped to contain the spread of the abuse of the two substances locally.

9. The Places of Public Entertainment Ordinance (Amendment of Schedule 1) Regulation 2002, which has come into operation on 15 January 2003, puts rave parties and similar dance parties not otherwise regulated under the Ordinance's licensing control. Dovetailing with the introduction of the licensing scheme, a revised Code of Practice for Dance Party Organizers was issued by the Narcotics Division, Security Bureau (ND) in mid-January 2003. The original code issued in October 2000, which contains detailed guidelines on operating safe parties and preventing drug-related crimes and safety problems in party venues, was well received by the trade.

10. In the past few years, the Police, Customs and Excise Department and Department of Health have all accorded top priority to countering psychotropic substance abuse in their anti-drug initiatives. Stringent enforcement efforts targeting psychotropic substance abuse and their illicit trafficking have been carried out. The Police have stepped up enforcement action in cracking down on blackspots of drug trafficking while the Customs has strengthened its intelligence units, drug detector capabilities and upgraded inspection facilities to counter cross-boundary drug crimes. The Department of Health also carries out regular and surprise inspections of drugstores and dispensaries to prevent the illicit supply of dangerous drugs.

Preventive Education and Publicity

11. An integral part of the Government's anti-drug preventive education and publicity programme is to help young people to build up the capability of leading a balanced, positive and healthy life through innovative and interactive strategies. In the past few years, the elements of the harmful and addictive effect of psychotropic substance abuse, life-skill training and refusal skills have been strengthened in all anti-drug activities targeting young people. In 2002, ND's drug education talks

had reached out to over 150 000 students. Its Anti-drug Abuse Hotline received over 30 000 calls and a total of 160 anti-drug programmes were held in the Drug InfoCentre with over 15 000 participants.

12. Apart from the conventional methods of large-scale publicity campaigns and production of posters, television and radio APIs, new and innovative publicity measures appealing to the interest and culture of young people have also been deployed to help bring across anti-drug messages to the younger generation. For example, a role-playing online game has been launched recently on the drug information webpage of the ND. Anti-drug television and radio series, including dramas with real life cases, have also been produced under the sponsorship of the Beat Drugs Fund to promote anti-drug awareness among the community as a whole.

13. Through the provision of various services such as Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers (paragraph 14 below), Integrated Children and Youth Services Centres, District Youth Outreaching Social Work Teams, School Social Work Teams, all-night drop-in centres, etc. operated by non-government organizations (NGOs) under subvention by the Social Welfare Department, young people vulnerable to drug abuse are identified at an early stage for timely intervention. The departments concerned also collaborate with each other in providing timely assistance to youth-at-risk. These initiatives include, among others, the opening of some Indoor Recreation Centres at late night hours for NGOs to conduct programmes for young night drifters and the setting up of a referral system under which young people involving in minor offences are referred by the Police and the Customs for follow-up social services.

Treatment and Rehabilitation

14. To address the increased demand for assistance by psychotropic substance abusers, especially among young people, the Government has been strengthening the various service provisions. Apart from the six substance abuse clinics operated by the Hospital Authority which provide medical services for psychotropic substance abusers, additional provision has been made to NGOs to operate Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers. With the opening of the two additional centres in October 2002, there are now a total of five regional centres covering the whole of Hong Kong.

15. A number of NGOs also operates programmes for those people who wish to seek residential treatment and rehabilitation voluntarily. To provide more treatment facilities to psychotropic substance abusers, a mixed-mode centre, offering both out-patient and in-patient services, will soon commence operation in Tuen Mun. Operated by an NGO under subvention by the Department of Health, the centre will start its first intake before mid 2003.

External Cooperation

16. On the regional front, cooperation with the Guangdong and Macao authorities has been enhanced to tackle cross border drug abuse and drug trafficking. Parallel enforcement actions with the Guangdong and Macao authorities targeting cross-boundary drug trafficking have been stepped up. The Police worked closely and jointly with their Mainland and Macao counterparts in the “Operation Fire Phoenix” to combat cross-boundary criminal activities, including drug abuse and trafficking. In 2002, the Customs launched eight parallel enforcement actions with the Mainland authorities.

17. Cooperation between Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao on countering drug abuse and trafficking has been further promoted through the second tripartite conference recently held in Zhongshan, Guangdong on 20 and 21 February 2003, following the successful inaugural conference in Hong Kong in November 2001. Enforcement efforts on suppressing cross boundary drug abuse and trafficking will be further enhanced. Joint efforts in other areas such as publicity and preventive education, research, and sharing of information on drug abuse trends have been and will continue to be pursued actively by the three places.

Research

18. Findings obtained through objective and systematic research studies provide useful reference to facilitate the formulation of evidence-based anti-drug strategies. In the course of its deliberations, the Task Force had commissioned two research studies on the psychotropic substance abuse problem and made reference to a number of related studies commissioned by ACAN. In 2002, the Government had commissioned three more research studies on this area. These studies focussed on cognitive impairment and other harmful effects of “ecstasy” and ketamine, cross-boundary substance abuse problem among young people, and substance abuse in the context of the underground rave culture.

NEW INITIATIVES

19. In the coming years, the remaining and longer term recommendations of the Task Force will be pursued vigorously. The major initiatives are highlighted below.

Legislation

20. On the legislative front, an inter-departmental working group was set up in late 2002 to review the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (Cap 134) in pursuant of one of the major recommendations of the Task Force. The review, which is expected to be completed in one year's time, will help to determine whether there is a need to further improve the Ordinance's provisions to help in combating psychotropic substance abuse.

Preventive Education and Publicity

21. The Anti-drug Volunteer Scheme will be further expanded to recruit more individuals as well as corporate volunteers to participate directly in the design and implementation of anti-drug programmes. This objective is to extend coverage of the partnership that has already been forged and to better utilise community resources in the fight against drugs

22. Promotion of drug education among young people will be enhanced through the opening of the Drug InfoCentre Phase II scheduled for late 2003. Multi-media exhibits and interactive games employing the latest technology will be installed in the new centre which has a total area of 900 square metres.

Treatment and Rehabilitation

23. A working group has been set up early this year to work on the third "Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong". The plan, which is a joint effort by the Government and NGOs, will review the existing provision of drug treatment and rehabilitation services and map out a blueprint for the future development in the coming three years. One of the key areas of work is to encourage drug treatment and rehabilitation agencies to reengineer their existing services to better meet the service needs of psychotropic substance

abusers. The plan is expected to be completed by 2003.

External Cooperation

24. Continued emphasis will be placed on enhancing cross-boundary cooperation on tackling drug related crimes and problems, having regard to the rapid increase in the inflow and outflow of human and cargo traffic in the Pearl River Delta. To sustain the initiatives achieved through the previous conferences involving Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao, the tripartite conference will be held on an on-going basis. The next conference is scheduled to be held in October 2004 in Macao. Meanwhile, law enforcement agencies will continue to build on the cooperation arrangements established over the past few years and carry out joint and parallel anti-drug operations with both Guangdong and Macao, especially those targeting cross-boundary trafficking.

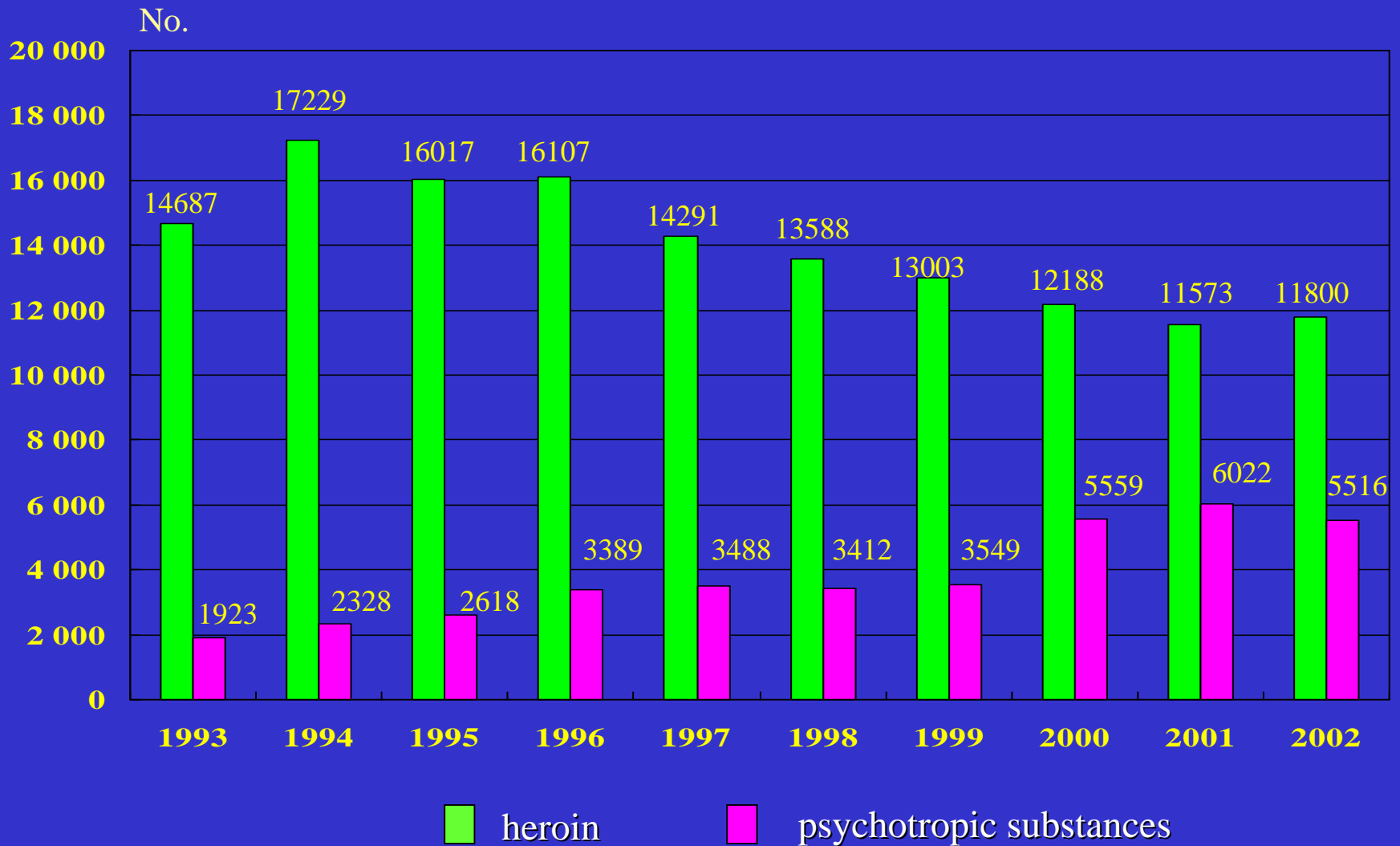
25. As in previous years, the Beat Drugs Fund and the Community Against Drugs Scheme will continue to accord priority to those projects which are targeted at tackling the psychotropic substance abuse problem.

WAY FORWARD

26. Through the joint efforts of the Government and the community over the past few years, we have managed to contain the increase of psychotropic substance abuse. The Government will continue to work towards building a community coalition, partnering with the various sectors of the community, e.g. NGOs, parents, schools, employers and other community organizations for concerted efforts in the fight against drug abuse and trafficking.

Narcotics Division
Security Bureau
April 2003

Number of reported heroin and psychotropic substance abusers

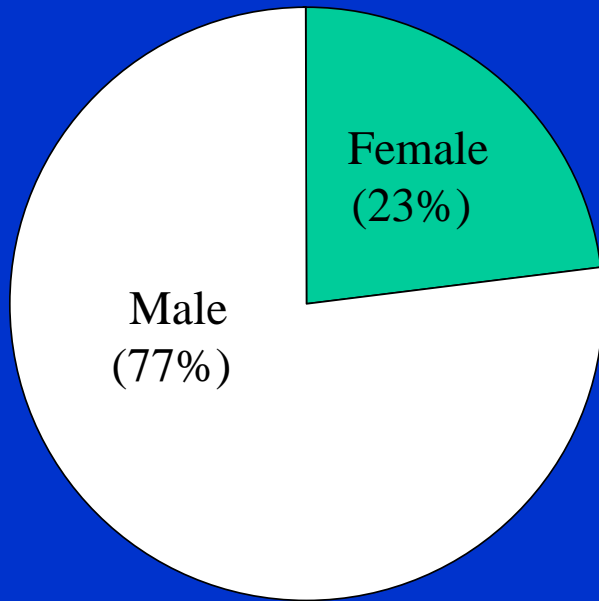


Notes : 1. Figures refer to the no. of drug abusers with type of drug reported.

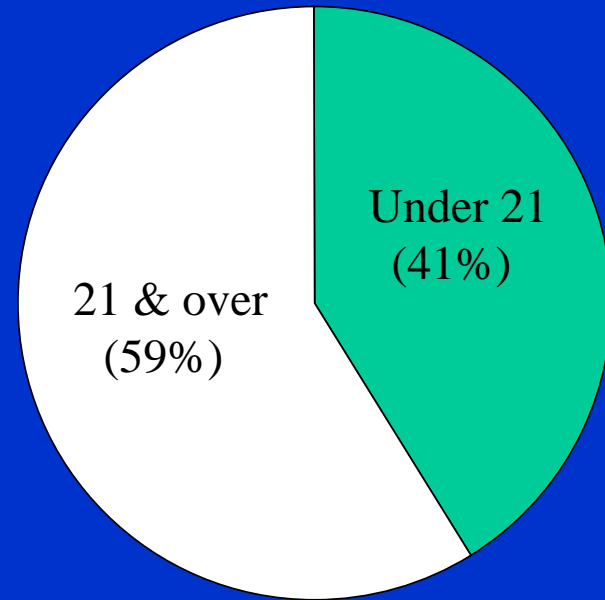
2. More than one type of drug may be reported for each individual drug abuser.

Number of reported psychotropic substance abusers in 2002

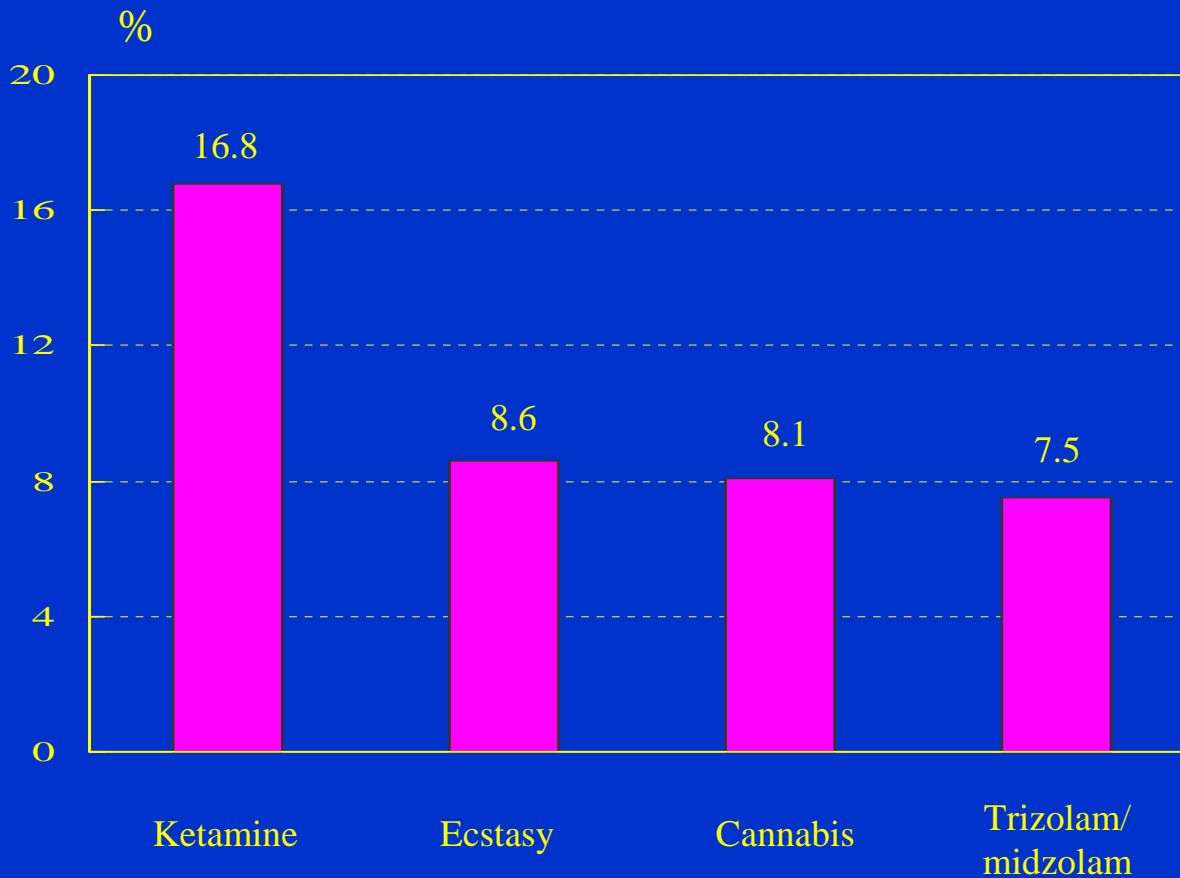
By sex



By age

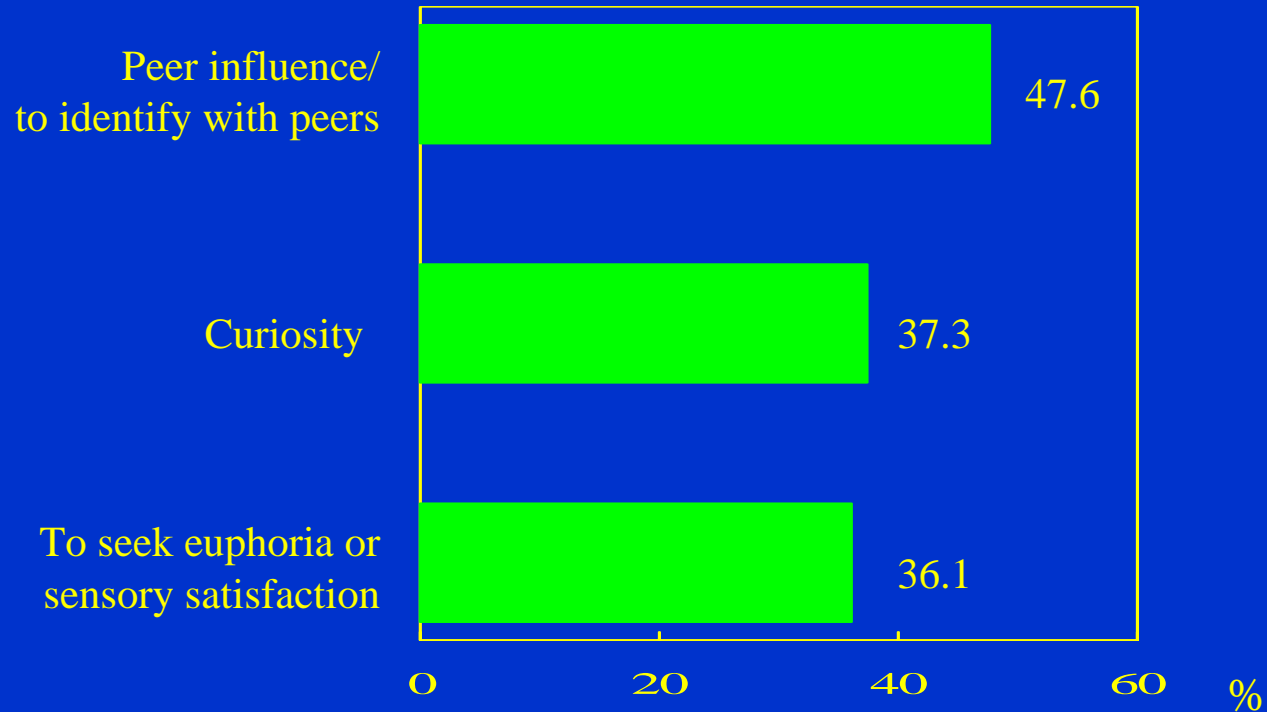


Commonly abused psychotropic substances in 2002



Note : More than one type of drug may be reported for each individual drug abuser.

Reasons for current use of psychotropic substance abusers in 2002



Note : More than one reason for current drug use may be reported for each individual drug abuser.

Annex E

A copy of this document is kept at the Legislative Council Library.
Please contact the Legislative Council Library if you wish to refer to this document.