

For discussion on
7 July 2020

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Drug Situation in Hong Kong in 2019

Purpose

This paper provides information to Members on the drug situation in Hong Kong in 2019 and the Government's anti-drug efforts in response to the latest drug situation.

Background

2. The Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) is set up to provide relevant drug abuse statistics for monitoring changes in drug abuse trends and characteristics of drug abusers to facilitate the planning of anti-drug strategies and programmes in Hong Kong. It is a voluntary reporting system recording the details of drug abusers who have come into contact with and have been reported by the reporting agencies, including law enforcement agencies (LEAs), treatment and welfare agencies, tertiary institutions, hospitals and clinics.

3. Compiled statistics of CRDA are reported to the Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) and released on a quarterly basis. By its nature, while CRDA statistics do not measure the exact size of the drug abusing population in Hong Kong at any particular time, they are indicators of the trends of drug abuse over time.

4. Other relevant sources also provide reference on the drug situation, including the triennial surveys of drug use among students, drug-related enforcement statistics (e.g. on arrests, prosecutions and convictions), relevant research studies and drug-related data (e.g. admission statistics of drug treatment and rehabilitation (T&R) service agencies).

5. The above data and findings provide useful information on the latest drug situation in Hong Kong, and support an evidence-based approach to the formulation of anti-drug policy and measures.

The Figures

CRDA Statistics

Profile of Drug Abusers

6. The key statistics on drug abusers reported to CRDA in 2019 are at Annex. There was a continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers in 2019 (at 5 614), 17% lower than that in 2018 (at 6 752). Their average age and average age of first abuse remained at 41 years and 19 years respectively. For reported young drug abusers aged under 21, the number increased by 1% (from 474 in 2018 to 479 in 2019). Their average age and average age of first abuse remained at 18 years and 16 years respectively.

7. The number of newly reported drug abusers in 2019 (at 1 544) was 11% lower than that in 2018 (at 1 727). Those aged under 21 increased by 2% (from 366 in 2018 to 373 in 2019). The proportion of young adults aged 21-35 remained at a relatively high level (46% in 2019 and 48% in 2018).

8. The median drug abuse history of newly reported cases (i.e. the time for abusers to be reported to the CRDA by reporting agencies from their first drug abuse) still stood high. Half had a drug history of at least 5.5 years (4.9 years in 2018).

Types of Drugs Abused

9. The total number of reported psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (at 3 471) continued to be higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 2 874). The higher rate was more evident among the newly reported abusers (number of PSAs and narcotics analgesics abusers at 1 336 and 181 respectively). Heroin remained as the single most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers, with the total number of reported abusers in 2019 (at 2 872) 21% lower than that in 2018 (at 3 626). Methamphetamine (commonly known as “Ice”) continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance abused, followed by triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone and cocaine. The total number of reported “Ice” abusers decreased by 18% (from 1 570 in 2018 to 1 291 in 2019), that of triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone abusers decreased by 10% (from 926 in 2018 to 838 in 2019), while that of cocaine abusers decreased by 24% (from 988 in 2018 to 751 in 2019). Cannabis was the fourth, but the number of reported abusers increased by 5% (from 483 in 2018 to 506 in 2019). Ketamine came fifth, with the number of reported abusers decreased by 19% (from 501 in 2018 to 405 in 2019).

10. For reported young drug abusers aged under 21, the most popular psychotropic substance abused was cannabis, followed by cocaine and “Ice”. Increased cannabis abuse was observed. The number of reported cannabis abusers increased by 48% (from 154 in 2018 to 228 in 2019). In contrast, the number of reported cocaine (from 259 in 2018 to 203 in 2019) and “Ice” abusers (from 87 in 2018 to 65 in 2019) decreased by 22% and 25% respectively.

Reasons and Localities

11. The most common reasons for taking drugs were “to avoid discomfort of its absence”, “to relieve boredom/depression/stress” and “to identify with peers”. On the localities of taking drugs, 54% of the reported drug abusers only took drugs at home or friend’s home.

Enforcement

12. The total number of drug-related arrests¹ in 2019 decreased by 43% (from 4 240 in 2018 to 2 399 in 2019), with the highest proportion attributable to “Ice”-related cases (24%), followed by cocaine-related cases (18%). The total number of persons prosecuted for all drug offences decreased by 20% (from 3 030 in 2018 to 2 435 in 2019), with 11 persons aged under 16 convicted of drug trafficking (four in 2018).

Major Drug Trends

13. The above figures and findings have reflected the following major drug trends –

- (a) **continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers, but sign of increased drug abuse among youngsters** – CRDA revealed that the total number of reported drug abusers continued to decline in 2019 (paragraph 6 above). The decrease in 2019 was quite significant, i.e. 17% lower than in 2018. However, the number of reported drug abusers aged under 21 increased slightly in 2019, showing signs of increased drug abuse among youngsters (paragraph 6 above);
- (b) **continued decline in the number of newly reported drug abusers, but proportion of young adults remained relatively high** – the number of newly reported drug abusers in 2019 registered a decline of 11% lower than that of 2018, but the proportion being young adults (aged 21-35) remained at a relatively high level (46%) (paragraph 7 above);
- (c) **continued prevalence of psychotropic substance abuse, with increased cannabis abuse** – while “Ice” continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance, it registered a decrease in the number of abusers. On the other hand, cannabis abuse increased, especially among those aged under 21 (increased by 48%) (paragraphs 9 and 10 above); and

¹ The decrease in arrests might not be able to reflect the real drug situation in the second half of the year, given that large amount of police resources had been re-deployed to cope with the public order events since June 2019.

- (d) **hidden drug abuse still a concern** – the median drug history of 5.5 years of newly reported cases (paragraph 8 above), and home/friend’s home only being the most common locality for drug taking (paragraph 11 above), call for continued attention to the issue of hidden drug abuse.

Anti-drug Efforts

14. Our anti-drug policy and measures have all along been underpinned by a multi-pronged approach, comprising preventive education and publicity (PE&P), T&R, legislation and law enforcement, external cooperation and research. The fight against drugs is a long-term haul requiring continuous concerted efforts under the multi-pronged approach to respond to the latest drug trends. In view of the major drug trends as observed in paragraph 13 above, we will take forward key anti-drug initiatives along the directions outlined below.

PE&P

15. The PE&P campaign in the coming months will continue to enhance community awareness of the drug problem (especially the harms of cannabis, cocaine and “Ice” abuse), promote early identification of hidden drug abusers, and encourage early help-seeking. Specifically, anti-drug messages will continue to be disseminated through different media and community platforms so as to maximise the access to different target groups, especially the youth and young adults. Collaboration with different organisations (including non-governmental organisations and media organisations) to launch suitable anti-drug programmes will be sustained. Promotion of help-seeking through the 24-hour helpline “186 186” and the instant messaging service “98 186 186” will also continue. We will also enhance PE&P initiatives for people of diverse races so as to extend the reach of our anti-drug campaign to different sectors of the community.

16. We note the alarming development of increased number of reported young cannabis abusers aged under 21 (having increased by 48% in 2019 as compared with 2018). The legalisation of use of recreational cannabis and the discussion of the issue on the national agendas in a few overseas jurisdictions, and a wide range of cannabis products (including food, drinks, topical products for applying to skin, hair or nails, as well as cannabis extracts) in some overseas jurisdictions, may further fuel the misconception, especially among young people, that cannabis is not harmful. We have since 2019 stepped up efforts to enhance awareness of drug harms of cannabis, particularly in providing correct information on the harms of cannabis abuse to rectify mistaken concepts and helping identify cannabis products. In recent months, we have launched a new series of initiatives on cannabis, including a new poster, a pamphlet and a detailed note which provide further information on the harmful effects of cannabis and other pertinent

information. We also launched new television and radio announcements in the public interest in June 2020 appealing to members of the public, especially young people, to resist cannabis abuse and to maintain healthy and positive lifestyles. A series of television programme was broadcast in June 2020 with highlights on the misunderstanding of cannabis and providing tips for parents to identify and help their children who use cannabis.

17. Looking forward, we will build upon the ongoing initiatives as well as explore new approaches and channels to appeal to members of the public, particularly young people, to stay away from cannabis and other drugs. We will send a clear and unequivocal message to the public that the use, production, trafficking, etc. of drugs, including cannabis, are illegal and will remain so.

18. The Hong Kong Jockey Club Drug InfoCentre (DIC) as an anti-drug PE&P hub will continue to roll out different programmes for individual target groups, including exhibitions, activities and sharing sessions promoting healthy lifestyles to young people, visits and talks for students, parents and anti-drug partners, etc. With a view to enhancing DIC's role as the hub of anti-drug education and professional exchange, a revamping exercise of DIC is under way. The hardware and exhibits of DIC will be enhanced in keeping with the latest drug trend and PE&P strategy. The renovation works are expected to commence in early 2021.

19. For schools, we will continue to arrange anti-drug training and programmes for teachers, school management personnel and students. Publicity work will continue be carried out to encourage secondary schools' participation in the Healthy School Programme with a Drug Testing Component and the "Participate in Sports, Stay Away from Drugs" Programme.

T&R

20. We have adopted a multi-modality approach in providing T&R services to drug abusers with different T&R needs. These services include voluntary residential programmes implemented in drug treatment and rehabilitation centres by non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based counselling centres for PSAs and centres for drug counselling run by NGOs, voluntary outpatient methadone treatment programme administered by the Department of Health, substance abuse clinics in all seven hospital clusters of the Hospital Authority, and compulsory treatment programmes operated in drug addiction treatment centre by the Correctional Services Department.

21. The Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong for 2018-2020 (the Three-year Plan) issued in March 2018 has recommended strategic T&R directions to respond to the prevailing drug situation, with the aim of facilitating anti-drug service providers to review and develop their plans and programmes in the three-year period. We have been, in partnership with

relevant parties, overseeing and coordinating efforts as appropriate in pursuing initiatives according to the strategic directions set out in the Three-year Plan. ND has also commenced a consultation exercise with relevant stakeholders on the next Three-year Plan for 2021-2023.

Beat Drugs Fund (BDF)

22. BDF has been supporting worthwhile anti-drug projects. Since its establishment, BDF has funded over 1 500 projects covering PE&P, T&R and research at the territory-wide and district levels, with a total grant of over HK\$1.64 billion up to May 2020. The Governing Committee of the BDF Association will, taking into account the latest drug situation and the advice of ACAN, draw up specific priority areas in the annual BDF Regular Funding Scheme (RFS) to guide applicants in planning suitable anti-drug projects responding to the latest drug problems. The latest drug trends will provide the basis for formulating the priority areas in the coming RFS Funding Exercise.

Legislation, Law Enforcement and External Cooperation

23. We will continue to maintain vigilance in monitoring overseas and local drug trends. As a regular exercise, the Government has from time to time proposed amendments to the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (DDO) (Cap. 134) and the Control of Chemicals Ordinance (CCO) (Cap. 145) as appropriate to include new substances under statutory control, having regard to a host of relevant factors, including international control requirements, the uses and harmful effects of the substances, severity of abuse in the local and overseas contexts, advice of ACAN and relevant authorities, etc. This is to ensure that law enforcement agencies in Hong Kong could respond effectively to the latest drug developments. In May 2020, we introduced to the Legislative Council amendments to DDO and CCO on bringing five new dangerous drugs and three new precursor chemicals under statutory control. The amendments will become effective in July 2020. We are currently embarking on another legislative exercise to bring new substances under control, in view of the domestic situation and international control requirements and practices.

24. LEAs will continue with the strategy of targeting drug supply at source through stemming the illegal import of dangerous drugs, strengthening the patrol of black spots, conducting cyber patrol and adopting measures to combat drug trafficking.

25. On external cooperation, representatives of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government will continue to participate in various events on the international fora (such as the United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs) as members of the Chinese delegation, to keep ourselves abreast of the latest developments on drugs in the international scene. LEAs will also continue to maintain cooperation with regional and international counterparts, including

maintaining liaison and conducting intelligence exchange to combat drug trafficking.

Advice Sought

26. Members are invited to note the contents of this paper.

**Narcotics Division
Security Bureau
June 2020**

**Key Statistics Reported to
Central Registry of Drug Abuse in 2019**

Profile of Drug Abusers

- (1) the total number of reported drug abusers in 2019 was 5 614, 17% lower than that in 2018 (at 6 752);
- (2) the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 recorded an increase by 1% (from 474 to 479). Students accounted for 26% of reported drug abusers of that age group in 2019, compared to 20% in 2018;
- (3) the number of newly reported drug abusers in 2019 (at 1 544) was 11% lower than that in 2018 (at 1 727). Among them, those aged under 21 increased by 2% (from 366 to 373), while those aged 21 and above decreased by 14% (from 1 361 to 1 171). The proportion of young adults aged 21-35 remained at a relatively high level (46% in 2019 and 48% in 2018);
- (4) half of the newly reported abusers in 2019 had abused drugs for at least 5.5 years (4.9 years in 2018). Among the newly reported young drug abusers aged under 21, half had abused drugs for at least 0.9 year (1.1 years in 2018);
- (5) the number of male abusers fell by 17% (from 5 428 to 4 493), and the number of female abusers fell by 15% (from 1 324 to 1 121);
- (6) compared with 2018, the average age of young drug abusers aged under 21 and their average age of first abuse remained at 18 years and 16 years respectively. As for all drug abusers, the average age and the average age of first abuse remained at 41 years and 19 years respectively;

Type of Drugs Abused

- (7) in 2019, the number of reported psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (at 3 471) continued to be higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 2 874). Among those newly reported, the number of PSAs (at 1 336) was considerably higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 181);

- (8) compared with 2018, the number of PSAs reduced by 13% (from 4 000 to 3 471), while that of the narcotics analgesics abusers (vast majority being heroin abusers) decreased by 21% (from 3 627 to 2 874);
- (9) heroin remained to be the single most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers, with the total number of reported abusers in 2019 (at 2 872) 21% lower than that in 2018 (at 3 626);
- (10) methamphetamine (commonly known as “Ice”) continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance abused in 2019. Compared with 2018, the number of reported “Ice” abusers decreased by 18% (from 1 570 to 1 291), with 5% of whom aged under 21. Triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone came second while cocaine came third. The number of reported triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone abusers decreased by 10% (from 926 to 838), with none aged under 21. The number of reported cocaine abusers was 24% lower (from 988 to 751) than that in 2018, with 27% of whom aged under 21. Cannabis was the fourth, with the number of reported abusers having increased by 5% (from 483 to 506). Ketamine came as the fifth, with the number of reported abusers decreased by 19% (from 501 to 405);
- (11) compared with 2018, the numbers of reported abusers of other major types of psychotropic substances were as follows: nimetazepam having dropped by 42% (from 24 to 14); cough medicine having dropped by 10% (from 280 to 252) and MDMA having dropped by 7% (from 41 to 38);
- (12) for reported young drug abusers aged under 21, the number of cannabis abusers increased by 48% (from 154 in 2018 to 228 in 2019); that of cocaine abusers decreased by 22% (from 259 in 2018 to 203 in 2019); while that of “Ice” abusers decreased by 25% (from 87 in 2018 to 65 in 2019);
- (13) the number of drug abusers taking more than one type of drugs in 2019 was 15% lower than that in 2018 (from 1 538 to 1 313)¹;

¹ For an abuser taking more than one type of drugs, he/she would be counted more than once in analysing individual types of drugs and “multiple counts” of the same person would occur.

Others

- (14) the most common reasons for all drug abusers reported for taking drugs were to avoid discomfort of its absence (47%), to relieve boredom/depression/stress (45%), and to identify with peers (32%). For young drug abusers aged under 21, to identify with peers (56%) was the most common reason for taking drugs, followed by to relieve boredom/depression/stress (42%) and to seek euphoria or sensory satisfaction (28%);
- (15) 54% of the reported drug abusers took drugs at home/friend's home only, another 23% at both home/friend's home and other localities, and the remaining 23% at other localities only. Among the reported young drug abusers aged under 21, the three most popular localities for taking drugs were home/friend's home (63%), public areas like recreation area/public park/public toilet (25%) and party gathering in club house/building/hotel/bar (19%);
- (16) reported abusers of heroin and triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone had a relatively higher frequency of abusing drugs in general, with a median monthly frequency of abusing drugs at 60 times. The corresponding figures for other reported psychotropic substance abusers were much lower (e.g. 30 times for cough medicine abusers, 12 times for ketamine abusers, 11 times for "Ice" abusers, 8 times for nimetazepam abusers, 7 times for cocaine abusers and 4 times for cannabis abusers); and
- (17) 70% of the reported drug abusers had previously been convicted. Among them, most had previous convictions of either drug-related offences only (36%) or both drug-related and other offences (23%), while 10% had previous convictions of other offences only.
