

For discussion on
8 April 2014

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
PANEL ON SECURITY**

Drug situation in Hong Kong in 2013

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the drug situation in 2013, and reports on the latest progress of the Government's anti-drug efforts and the way forward in response to the latest drug situation.

BACKGROUND

2. The Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) is established 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 which records drug abusers who have come into contact with and have been reported by its reporting agencies, including law enforcement agencies (LEA), 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. Although the CRDA does not measure the exact size of the drug abusing population in Hong Kong at any particular time, statistics derived therefrom are indicators of the trends of drug abuse over time, providing a comprehensive picture of the latest drug situation to facilitate the formulation of anti-drug policy and allocation of resources for suitable anti-drug initiatives.

4. Figures on the 2013 drug situation in Hong Kong are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

FIGURES

5. Key statistics on drug abusers reported to the CRDA in 2013 are at Annex. In gist, there was a continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers in 2013 (10 069), which was 9% lower than that of 2012 (11 097). The number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 recorded a substantial decline by 27% (from 1 623 to 1 182). The average age of young drug abusers aged under 21 and their average age of first abuse were 18 and 15 respectively, same as 2012. As for all drug abusers, their average age increased from 36 to 37 and the average age of first abuse remained at 18.

6. The number of newly reported drug abusers (2 497) was 15% lower than that of 2012 (2 944). Among them, those aged under 21 decreased by 30% (from 1 020 to 711) and those aged 21 and over by 7% (from 1 924 to 1 786). In addition, both male and female abusers had seen a decline by 9% when compared with 2012 (male abusers having declined from 9 027 to 8 181 and female abusers from 2 070 to 1 888).

7. Despite the continual decline in the number of drug abusers, the drug history of newly reported cases had continued to rise. Half of the newly reported abusers had abused drugs for 4.6 years or more, compared with 4.1 years in 2012. The same figure in 2009 was 2.1 years, having more than doubled over the past five years. This is a cause for concern since prolonged psychotropic drug abuse could result in serious harm to the health of drug abusers.

8. On drug types, the number of reported narcotics analgesics abusers (5 115) continued to be lower than the number of psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (6 137). Among the newly reported cases, the number of PSAs (2 118) was much higher than the number of narcotics analgesics abusers (346). Ketamine remained to be the most popular type of psychotropic substances abused. With an overall decrease in the total number of reported drug abusers, the number of most PSAs had also declined, except for methamphetamine (“ice”) (8% higher) and cocaine (1% higher).

9. On the localities of taking drugs, about 80% of the drug abusers were reported to have taken drugs at home or at friends’ home. The most common reasons reported for taking drugs were to relieve

boredom/depression/stress (49%), to identify with peers (48%), and to avoid discomfort of withdrawal (41%).

WAY FORWARD

10. The following characteristics could be observed from the 2013 drug situation –

- (a) declining number of drug abusers: there was a continued decline (9%) in the total number of reported drug abusers (from 11 097 in 2012 to 10 069 in 2013), with a substantial decline (27%) in the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 (from 1 623 in 2012 to 1 182 in 2013); and
- (b) growing problem of hidden drug abuse: half of the newly reported abusers had abused drugs for 4.6 years or more, compared with 4.1 years in 2012. Specifically, about 80% of the reported drug abusers took drugs at home or at friends' home.

11. The Administration champions the war against drug through a holistic, five-pronged anti-drug strategy, including preventive education and publicity (PE&P), treatment and rehabilitation (T&R), legislation and law enforcement, external cooperation and research. The Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau, as the central policy-maker and with the advice of the ACAN, actively co-ordinates and spearheads the work of relevant bureaux, departments and organisations, as well as different sectors of the community along the five-pronged strategy. The declining drug trend could be attributed to the concerted and enhanced anti-drug efforts of the Government and the community along the five-pronged strategy over the past few years. To sustain the anti-drug momentum and to further extend the reach of anti-drug messages to a wider cross-section of the community as well as specific high-risk groups, we would continue to maintain vigilance and ensure that our anti-drug policies, measures and resources meet the changing needs of the evolving drug scene.

12. As regards hidden drug abuse, as part of the efforts to promote early identification of drug abusers to enable timely intervention, ACAN

had launched a public consultation exercise on the RESCUE drug testing scheme (RDT). The consultation exercise ended in late January 2014 and ACAN is evaluating the views gathered (paragraph 21 below). In addition to the enhancements in different T&R services, ND also actively promotes different help-seeking channels to people with drug problems, highlighting the importance of early help-seeking and promoting early intervention before irreversible damage is done to the physical and mental health of psychotropic drug abusers. In view of the growing problem of hidden drug abuse (paragraphs 7 and 10(b) above) and the increased use of private premises for drug-taking (paragraph 9), there is a pressing need to step up efforts in encouraging people with drug problems to seek help early and empowering members of the community, including parents, to take up an active role in identifying drug abusers to enable early intervention.

13. More details of the anti-drug policies and initiatives implemented along the five-pronged strategies are set out in the ensuing paragraphs.

PE&P

14. As part of our ongoing efforts, ACAN and ND organise PE&P initiatives through various channels, including publicity programmes through the mass media, electronic media and public transportation networks, as well as large-scale anti-drug events. More recently, we have also enhanced publicity through the internet and social media platforms in light of their growing popularity. We will continue to explore possible opportunities for further collaboration with the media and other new media channels.

15. Beat Drugs Fund (BDF) supports worthwhile anti-drug projects in the areas of PE&P, T&R and research. The Government injection of \$3 billion in 2010 has enhanced its income base for supporting suitable projects. Since 2010, the BDF has supported a total of 209 projects with a total funding of \$340 million. In response to the growing problem of hidden drug abuse, the BDF launched the Anti-drug Community Awareness Building Programme in mid-2013, providing \$3.6 million to the 18 districts for promoting drug awareness among members of the community, parents and frontline workers. This aims to enable a broader cross-section of the community to play an active role in drug prevention, early identification and intervention.

16. The “186 186” hotline service is a useful channel for encouraging early help-seeking. In view of the increasing popularity of the use of instant messaging among young people, there will be an additional feature of WhatsApp and WeChat to allow instant messaging for the “186 186” anti-drug hotline service. This would provide another means to facilitate people-in-need to seek help in a way that is convenient to them.

17. Parents play an important role in the growth of their children and in the early alert to their problems, including drug abuse behaviour. In this regard, the Hong Kong Jockey Club Drug InfoCentre organises different lunchtime talks for working parents, as part of the work in parent education and to heighten their drug awareness to facilitate early identification of the drug abuse behaviour of their children. We will continue similar parent education initiatives by cooperating with different organisations (e.g. professional bodies, parent-teacher associations and district organisations).

Healthy School Programme with a Drug Testing Component (HSP(DT))

18. Schools are at the forefront of the campaign against youth drug abuse. We devote considerable resources in providing anti-drug teacher training and student education programmes with a view to fostering a drug-free culture in schools. In addition, it is also important to instil in young people an awareness of drug evils and promote positive values which would be essential for them to meet challenges in life, including drug temptations. The HSP(DT) is a school-based preventive education initiative aiming at fostering a drug-free culture in schools. It comprises diversified personal growth programmes and a voluntary drug testing component. Programmes may be tailored to meet the needs of different target groups, including high-risk students, parents, and teachers. The voluntary drug testing component, as a key element of this preventive education initiative, is intended to provide an appropriate context for commitment education for students.

19. In the 2013/14 school year, 63 schools, together with their partner non-government organisations (NGOs), are implementing HSP(DT). As a sustaining preventive education initiative at schools, HSP(DT) is not an one-off measure. With the aim of progressively rolling out HSP(DT) to more secondary schools, we will continue our

annual evaluation of the operations of HSP(DT) and refine details to take into account feedback collected from participating schools and NGOs.

T&R

20. The lengthening of the drug history of newly reported drug abusers and the severe health impact of prolonged psychotropic drug abuse render it important to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach and better co-ordinate among various service modes in the T&R of drug abusers. As the central co-ordinator, ND will continue to spearhead efforts across Government bureaux/departments, the public sector (e.g. the Hospital Authority) and NGOs to pursue the directions established in the “Sixth Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong” (2012-2014). For example, ND will continue to promote cross-sector collaboration and development of new services of good quality through BDF funding. ND will also continue to monitor the demand for various services and ensure that resource allocation meets the changing demand. For instance, under the policy steer of ND, the Social Welfare Department and operators of Counselling Centres for Psychotropic Substance Abusers, in renewing the funding and services agreements in October 2013, have taken into account the work in engaging drug abusers’ family members and providing PE&P programmes for drug abusers at work place.

RESCUE Drug Testing (RDT)

21. Prolonged psychotropic substance abuse brings serious, at times irreversible, harm to the health of drug abusers. To facilitate early identification of drug abusers and to provide early intervention, the ACAN conducted a four-month public consultation exercise on RDT between September 2013 and January 2014. ACAN is in the process of analysing the views collected. The aim is to draw a conclusion within this year and make recommendations to the Government on the next step. Public consensus is a prerequisite for pursuing RDT. The Government has no foregone conclusion and will decide on the way forward taking into account the recommendations by ACAN.

Legislation and Law Enforcement

22. Rapid changes in the drug scene nowadays have posed new challenges to legislative control and law enforcement. This calls for

increased vigilance both in monitoring the latest developments and timely response before any new drug becomes an issue of concern. We will continue to co-ordinate with LEAs and relevant departments in analysing overseas and local drug trends and formulating anti-drug policies and action plans.

23. On the operational front, a total of 748 kilograms and 119 851 tablets of dangerous drugs, at a market value of \$453.5 million were seized in 2013; 5 984 persons were arrested for drug-related offences. LEAs will continue their efforts against drug trafficking and drug abusing activities, as well as strengthening the patrol of targeted drug abuse black spots and adopt various measures at land boundary control points to curb trafficking of drugs across the boundary. Specifically, the Customs and Excise Department (C&ED) will set up a dedicated team in 2014-15 to step up enforcement against cross-boundary drug trafficking activities.

External Cooperation

24. On “external cooperation”, Hong Kong is committed to supporting international and Mainland actions against drug abuse and drug. We participate actively in international and regional anti-drug meetings and seminars. In 2014, we attended the 57th Session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotics Drugs as part of the Chinese delegation. This has allowed us to keep abreast of the evolving drug scene on the international level. Locally, the Hong Kong Police Force and C&ED will continue to reinforce their liaison and intelligence exchange with external counterparts. In particular, the dedicated team to be formed by C&ED will allow them to foster closer liaison and intelligence exchange with Mainland and overseas law enforcement agencies, allowing the mounting of time critical and demanding operations.

Research

25. Researches provide a solid foundation for the formulation of evidence-based anti-drug policies and programmes. In light of the prevalence of ketamine in Hong Kong, we have supported various researches to examine the drug harm of ketamine. Hong Kong is leading in this field of research and has over the past few years identified damages of ketamine to the urological system, mental health and brain functions. Recently, the preliminary results of a study, “A *targeted*

*urological treatment program for secondary school students abusing psychotropic substance and a territory-wide school-based survey of bladder dysfunction symptoms associated with psychotropic substance abuse*¹, showed that over 40% of the sampled ketamine abusers had abnormal liver function; some of them even suffered bile duct injury and liver fibrosis. In addition, cessation of ketamine use was found to be the mainstay for treatment of ketamine-associated uropathy.

26. Another two researches were completed in 2013/14. The study, *“Surveillance of emerging drugs of abuse in substance abusers”*² revealed the emergence of three psychoactive substances, i.e. PMMA, TFMPP and methcathinone, in Hong Kong. The study, *“A community study of uro-psycho-physical changes in young adults using ketamine”*³ showed that longer drug history, higher frequency and larger dosage were more detrimental to the body system functions to various degrees, for example, lower Body Mass Index, poorer lung function and overactive bladder function. These researches have provided important references to the Government as well as the anti-drug sector in formulating anti-drug strategies and response action. Similar efforts will continue.

ADVICE SOUGHT

27. Members are invited to note the 2013 drug situation, the latest progress of the Government’s anti-drug efforts and the way forward.

Narcotics Division
Security Bureau
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¹ Conducted by the Department of Surgery, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The preliminary clinical findings are available at the website of the Narcotics Division at http://www.nd.gov.hk/en/research_reports.htm.

² Conducted by the Hospital Authority Toxicology Reference Laboratory. The research report is available at the website of the Narcotics Division at http://www.nd.gov.hk/en/research_reports.htm.

³ Conducted by the North District Hospital. The research report is available at the website of the Narcotics Division at http://www.nd.gov.hk/en/research_reports.htm.

Annex

Summary of Central Registry of Drug Abuse Statistics for 2013

Profile of Drug Abusers

- (a) the total number of reported drug abusers (10 069) had continued to fall in 2013. It was 9% lower than that of 2012 (11 097);
- (b) the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 had continued to record a substantial decline by 27% (from 1 623 to 1 182);
- (c) the number of newly reported drug abusers (2 497) was 15% lower than that of 2012 (2 944). Among them, those aged under 21 had decreased by 30% (from 1 020 to 711) and those aged 21 and over by 7% (from 1 924 to 1 786);
- (d) the drug history of newly reported cases had continued to rise. Half of the newly reported abusers had abused drugs for at least 4.6 years, compared with 4.1 years in 2012. The same figure in 2009 was 2.1 years, which had increased more than double over the past five years. Among the newly reported young abusers, half had abused drugs for at least 1.5 years, compared with 1.8 years in 2012;
- (e) both male and female abusers had seen a decline, by 9% in total when compared with 2012 (male abusers having declined from 9 027 to 8 181 and female abusers from 2 070 to 1 888);
- (f) the average age of young drug abusers aged under 21 and their average age of first abuse were at 18 and 15, same as 2012. As for all drug abusers, the average age had increased from 36 to 37 and average age of first abuse remained at 18;

Type of Drugs Abused

- (g) in 2013, the number of reported narcotics analgesics abusers (5 115) continued to be lower than the number of psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (6 137). Among the newly reported drug

abusers, the number of PSAs (2 118) was much higher than the number of narcotics analgesics abusers (346);

- (h) comparing 2013 with 2012, the number of PSAs and those taking narcotics analgesics (mainly heroin) had lowered by 7% (from 6 634 to 6 137) and 13% (from 5 853 to 5 115) respectively;
- (i) heroin remained the most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers. The total number of reported heroin abusers in 2013 was 13% lower than that in 2012 (from 5 847 to 5 113);
- (j) ketamine remained the most popular type of psychotropic substances abused. The number of reported ketamine abusers was 15% lower (from 3 301 to 2 814), with 21% aged under 21;
- (k) the number of abusers of most of other types of PSAs had seen a reduction - nimetazepam (72% lower), MDMA (28% lower), cannabis (15% lower), cough medicine (17% lower) and triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone (11% lower), with the exception of methamphetamine (8% higher) and cocaine (1% higher);
- (l) the number of drug abusers taking more than one type of drugs⁴ in 2013 was 10% lower than that in 2012 (having decreased from 2 466 to 2 211);

Other Observations

- (m) the most common reasons for all drug abusers reported for taking drugs were to relieve boredom/depression/stress (49%), to identify with peers (48%), to avoid discomfort of withdrawal (41%), out of curiosity (23%) and to seek euphoria or sensory satisfaction (21%). For drug abusers aged under 21, to identify with peers (55%) was the most common reason for taking drugs, followed by to relieve boredom/depression/stress (47%) and out of curiosity (33%);
- (n) 52% of the drug abusers were reported to have taken drugs at home/friends' home only, another 29% at both home/friends' home and other localities, and the remaining 19% at other localities only.

⁴ For an abuser taking more than one drug type, he/she would be counted more than once in analysing individual types of drug and "multiple counts" of the same person would occur.

Among young drug abusers aged under 21, the three most popular categories of localities for taking drugs were home/friends' home (81%), public areas like recreation area/public garden/public toilet (27%) and disco/karaoke (10%);

- (o) abusers of heroin and triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone had a relatively higher frequency of abusing drugs in general, both with a median monthly frequency of abusing drugs at 60 times. The corresponding figures for other types of PSAs were much lower, e.g. 30 times for cough medicine abusers, 13 times for ketamine abusers, 9 times for methamphetamine and 8 times for cocaine abusers; and
- (p) about three quarters of the reported drug abusers were previously convicted. Among them, most (36%) had previous conviction of drug-related offences only, followed by those convicted of both drug-related and other offences (30%) and those convicted of other offences only (9%).