

For discussion on  
5 May 2015

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
PANEL ON SECURITY**

**Drug Situation in Hong Kong in 2014**

**PURPOSE**

This paper briefs Members on the drug situation in 2014, 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 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 drug abuse programmes in Hong Kong. It is a voluntary reporting system which records the details of drug abusers who have come into contact with and have been reported by its 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, the CRDA cannot 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 useful information on the latest drug situation in Hong Kong, and supporting an evidence-based approach to the formulation of anti-drug policy and measures.

## THE FIGURES

4. Key statistics on drug abusers reported to the CRDA in 2014 are at Annex. In gist, there was a continued decline in the number of reported drug abusers in 2014 (8 926), which was 13% lower than that of 2013 (10 241). The number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 recorded a substantial decline by 35% (from 1 223 to 800). The average age of young drug abusers aged under 21 and their average age of first abuse were 18 and 15 respectively, same as 2013. As for all drug abusers, their average age increased from 37 to 38 and the average age of first abuse remained at 18.

5. The number of newly reported drug abusers (2 008) was 23% lower than that of 2013 (2 623). Among them, those aged under 21 decreased by 36% (from 744 to 474) and those aged 21 and over by 18% (from 1 879 to 1 534). In addition, male abusers had seen a decline by 12% when compared with 2013 (from 8 286 to 7 284) while female abusers decreased by 16% (from 1 955 to 1 642).

6. 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 5.2 years or more, compared with 4.7 years in 2013. This is a cause for concern since prolonged psychotropic drug abuse could result in serious, and at times irreversible, harm to the health of drug abusers.

7. On drug types, the number of reported narcotics analgesics abusers (4 581) continued to be lower than the number of psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (5 428). Among the newly reported cases, the number of PSAs (1 696) was much higher than the number of narcotics analgesics abusers (300). Ketamine remained to be the most popular type of psychotropic substances abused, while the number of abusers of methamphetamine (“ice”) has been on the rise, increasing from 1 858 in 2013 to 2 025 in 2014 (an increase of 9% ).

8. On the localities of taking drugs, about 80% of the drug abusers were reported to have taken drugs at home or at friend’s home. The most common reasons reported for taking drugs were to relieve boredom/depression/stress (46%), to identify with peers (45%), and to avoid discomfort of its absence (40%).

9. Apart from CRDA, we have also looked into drug-related enforcement figures. Compared with 2013, the total number of drug-related arrests in 2014 was 18% lower than that in 2013 (from 6 026 to 4 917). The total number of defendants prosecuted for all drug offences was 9% lower (from 4 517 to 4 103). For defendants aged under 16 charged with trafficking in dangerous drugs, 87% (45 out of 52) of the defendants prosecuted were convicted in 2014. Among them, 84% (38 in number) were sentenced with imprisonment or detainment under Correctional Services Department. In particular, there were 45 young people aged under 16 who were convicted for drug trafficking, as compared to 63 persons in 2013 and 40 persons in 2012.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

10. Based on the latest figures set out above, we have the following observations –

- (a) **continued decline in the number of drug abusers:** there was a continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers (from 10 241 in 2013 to 8 926 in 2014), as well as reported young drug abusers under the age of 21 (from 1 223 in 2013 to 800 to 2014);
- (b) **worsening situation of hidden drug abuse continued:** the drug history of newly reported cases had continued to rise. Half of the newly reported abusers had abused drugs for 5.2 years, compared with 4.7 years in 2013 and 4.1 years in 2012. It has also more than doubled in a span of five years, as compared with 2.1 years in 2009. In addition, about 80% of the 2014 reported drug abusers took drugs at home or at friend's home, rather than at public places;
- (c) **young people involved in drug-related offences remained a concern:** against a surge in 2013 with 63 young persons aged under 16 being convicted for drug trafficking, the situation had stabilised somewhat in 2014 with 45 convicted. However, it remains a cause for concern in view of the possible serious consequences of such offences and the multiple arrests of young people involved in drug trafficking in recent months; and

- (d) **prevalence of psychotropic substance abuse continued:** the popularity of psychotropic substance abuse has been growing in the past decade, with the number of PSAs surpassing that of narcotics drug abusers since 2007. Specifically, a general decline was observed in most of the substances abused while the number of abusers of “ice” had been on an increasing trend, rising from 1 402 in 2009, to 1 858 and 2 025 in 2013 and 2014 respectively. We will closely monitor developments and ensure suitable initiatives be put in place in a timely manner.

## **WAY FORWARD**

### **Anti-drug strategies**

11. The anti-drug policies and measures in Hong Kong have been underpinned by a five-pronged strategy, comprising preventive education and publicity (PE&P), treatment and rehabilitation (T&R), legislation and law enforcement, external cooperation and research. The declining drug trend in the last few years again testifies to the effectiveness of such strategies, as well as of the concerted efforts of the Government and the community in fighting drugs. However, as set out in paragraph 3 above, the CRDA does not measure the exact size of the drug abusing population in Hong Kong and the figures presented in this paper serve mainly as indicators of the trend of drug abuse over time. We need to remain conscious about the existence of drug abusers who have not surfaced in the system, and the implications of the worsening hidden drug abuse problem (paragraph 10(b) above) on T&R services and other anti-drug measures and programmes. Noting these challenges ahead and to sustain the momentum of the declining drug trend, there is a need for us to continue our anti-drug efforts along the five-pronged approach. Such strategies would also help to keep drug-related crimes under control, as well as to prevent a resurgence of the drug problem, which brings major social, economic and personal costs.

12. In the coming year, in addition to on-going programmes, we would pay special attention to the following areas, taking into account the observations set out in paragraph 10 above –

- (a) **holding the fort of drug prevention:** the declining drug trend reflects some early success in curbing the deterioration in the drug abuse situation. However, it is necessary for the whole community to maintain vigilance to prevent the resurgence of such social ill. In addition, prevention is always better than cure. A clear downward trend in the drug abuse situation provides an even better setting against which preventive work could focus;
- (b) **promoting early identification, early intervention and provision of early assistance:** lacking obvious withdrawal symptom, it is generally more difficult for the drug abuse behaviour of PSAs to be noticed by those around them. In addition, PSAs have lower motivation to seek help in general. These constitute to the aggravation in the problem of hidden drug abuse, which remains a challenge in the anti-drug war. It is necessary, therefore, to continue to work proactively on different fronts to facilitate early identification of the hidden drug abusers to enable intervention in a more timely manner;
- (c) **tackling the problem of drug trafficking by young people:** young people being exploited in drug trafficking activities remains a major concern in light of the potential serious consequences. While the LEAs will continue to guard closely any such activities, there is a need to continue to step up efforts on the PE&P front to correct misguided beliefs that young people are less criminally culpable than adults when involved in drug-related offences; and
- (d) **fostering closer international cooperation and adopting an evidence-based approach in dealing with the drug problem:** the increasing prevalence of psychotropic substances and continuous emergence of new synthetic substances have become a global issue calling for closer cooperation among law enforcement authorities in different justifications to effectively tackle transnational drug crimes. At the local level, an evidence-based approach would continue be adopted to ensure a solid foundation to guide anti-drug policies and measures.

## **Major Focus of Initiatives**

13. Major initiatives that would be taken forward in the coming year under the five-pronged anti-drug strategy and the above specific directions are detailed in the ensuing paragraphs.

### PE&P

14. PE&P is the mainstay of drug prevention efforts. The PE&P campaign in the coming year will continue to promote public awareness of the drug problem, in particular, facilitating early identification of drug abusers. This will include further promoting help-seeking through the 24-hour helpline “186 186”, and instant message service “98 186 186”. The Beat Drugs Fund (BDF) will support initiatives at the district level (paragraph 21 below). In addition to publicising the harmful effects of drugs, we will devote further efforts to establish partnership in the community in fostering resistance against drug temptations through promoting healthy lifestyles and activities.

15. In addition, efforts will be made to publicise the serious legal consequences of drug-related offences, especially to dispel misguided beliefs about the risk to involvement in drug trafficking activities. On the publicity front, apart from placing advertisements through different media and platforms, we will continue to implement suitable media programmes, including exploring further partnering opportunities with the printed and electronic media. Taking note of the growing popularity of the new media, we will also implement suitable initiatives through popular websites, discussion fora and mobile apps. The Drug InfoCentre will strive to serve as a hub of anti-drug PE&P programmes and continue its efforts in organising different programmes for specific target groups, such as lunch-time seminars for working parents, band show and dance show for youngsters, and interactive seminar for students.

16. The school is an important platform for drug prevention work among young people. We will continue to arrange suitable anti-drug training for teachers and students. New preventive education initiatives for students, such as interactive drama, will also be implemented on trial. We will also continue to promote the Healthy School Programme with a

Drug Testing Component (HSP(DT)<sup>1</sup>) as a school-based PE&P initiative aiming at fostering a drug-free culture in schools. Efforts to progressively roll out the HSP(DT) to more secondary schools will continue. We are also planning to conduct an independent evaluation research in the 2015/16 school year to assess the overall effectiveness of the programme and identify areas for improvement.

## T&R

17. The worsening situation of hidden drug abuse has seen the substantial lengthening in the drug history of newly reported drug abusers, and the increasing problem of severe health issues among long-term abusers. It is important to continue to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach in drug treatment and rehabilitation services and to continue to enhance co-ordination among various service modes and across sectors to enhance the effectiveness of such programmes. As the central co-ordinator, Narcotics Division will continue to spearhead efforts across Government bureaux/departments, the public sector (e.g. the Hospital Authority) and non-government organisations in the preparation of the “Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong (2015-2017)”, which will be the seventh of such reports, to provide a broad direction to guide actions by different stakeholders in the sector.

18. With a view to exploring an additional means to enable early identification of drug abusers, ACAN conducted a four-month public consultation exercise on the RESCUE Drug Testing Scheme (RDT) from September 2013 to January 2014. ACAN announced in July 2014 the consultation conclusion, recommending that the Government should further explore the RDT while putting emphasis on –

- (a) continuing to engage stakeholders, professional bodies and the public in ongoing discussion;
- (b) exploring ways to address the concerns of professional bodies, especially how to minimize the interference to human rights and civil liberties; and

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<sup>1</sup> The HSP(DT) comprises two parts, namely preventive anti-drug activities and voluntary drug testing. Activities may be tailored to meet the needs of different target groups, including high-risk students, the general student population, parents, and teachers. The voluntary drug testing component, as a key element of this ongoing initiative, is intended to provide an appropriate context for commitment to refrain from drugs by students. In the 2014/15 school year, 71 schools, together with their partner NGOs, are implementing HSP(DT).

- (c) developing a follow-up mechanism which could effectively balance giving a chance to the drug abusers with mandating counseling and treatment.

19. The Government agreed with ACAN's recommendations and undertook to study the way forward in preparation of a further public consultation. There will be continued dialogue with different stakeholders before a concrete proposal is drawn up for the next round of consultation.

### BDF

20. Over the years, the Government has made substantive efforts to support worthwhile anti-drug projects through the BDF. In the past three years, the BDF has supported a total of 312 projects in the areas of PE&P, T&R and research, with a total funding of \$208 million. The Governing Committee of the BDF will, taking into account the latest drug trend and in consultation with ACAN, draw up specific priority areas in its annual funding exercises to guide applicants in planning suitable anti-drug projects that could respond to the latest drug problems. We will take into account the issues and anti-drug strategies set out in paragraphs 11 to 12 above in devising the priority areas in the 2015 regular funding exercise.

21. As an effort to tackle the growing problem of hidden drug abuse, the BDF launched on trial the Anti-drug Community Awareness Building (ACAB) Programme in mid 2013 to support all the 18 districts with a total funding of \$3.6 million to promote awareness on drug abuse among members of the community, parents and frontline workers; and to enable them to play a more active role in drug prevention, as well as early identification and intervention. The two-year programme ended in March 2015. We have reviewed its effectiveness and found that it has successfully enhanced participants' anti-drug awareness, improved their identification skills, extended the anti-drug network at the district level, and channeled additional district resources to organizing anti-drug activities. In view of these encouraging results and to sustain the efforts in combating hidden drug abuse, the BDF launched a new round of the programme in April 2015, with an extended duration of three years to March 2018 and an increased total funding of \$6.2 million.

22. The BDF also provides funding to support worthwhile research projects to enable an evidence-based approach in the formulation of anti-



drug policies and programmes. In light of the prevalence of psychotropic drugs such as ketamine in Hong Kong, we have in the past few years supported various research studies to examine the harmful effects of these drugs on the health of the abuser and the efficacy of various treatment modes. Findings of these studies have useful contributions to help the anti-drug sector develop various treatment methods and rehabilitative measures targeting specific abusers. The BDF will continue to support research projects.

### Legislation, law enforcement and international cooperation

23. Effective law enforcement is an important key to combating drug trafficking activities, including those involving young people. The LEAs will continue the strategy of targeting drug supply at source through stemming illegal import of dangerous drugs, strengthening the patrol of targeted drug abuse black spots and adopting various control measures at various control points to curb transnational drug trafficking activities. LEAs will also reinforce their liaison and intelligence exchange with Mainland and international counterparts, and carry out joint operations as and when appropriate.

24. The growing predominance of psychotropic substance abuse and the continuous emergence of new synthetic drugs pose new challenges to legislative control and law enforcement globally. We will remain vigilant in closely monitoring the drug trends both overseas and locally, and will take timely action to bring new drugs under legislative control.

### **ADVICE SOUGHT**

25. Members are invited to note the 2014 drug situation, and the progress and way forward of the Government's anti-drug efforts.

Narcotics Division  
April 2015

**Annex**

**Summary of Central Registry of Drug Abuse Statistics for 2014**

**Profile of Drug Abusers**

- (a) the total number of reported drug abusers had continued to fall in 2014. At 8 926, it was 13% lower than 10 241 in 2013;
- (b) the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 had continued to record a more substantial decline by 35%, from 1 223 in 2013 to 800 in 2014;
- (c) the number of newly reported drug abusers in 2014 (at 2 008) was 23% lower than that of 2013 (at 2 623). Among them, those aged under 21 had decreased by 36% (from 744 in 2013 to 474 in 2014) and those aged 21 and over decreased by 18% (from 1 879 in 2013 to 1 534 in 2014);
- (d) the drug history of newly reported cases had continued to rise. Half of the newly reported abusers had abused drugs for at least 5.2 years, compared with 4.7 years in 2013. Among the newly reported young abusers, half had abused drugs for at least 1.6 years, compared with 1.5 years in 2013;
- (e) the number of male abusers was 12% lower (having declined from 8 286 in 2013 to 7 284 in 2014), while the number of female abusers was 16% lower (at 1 955 in 2013 compared with 1 642 in 2014) ;
- (f) compared with 2013, the average age of young drug abusers aged under 21 and their average age of first abuse remained at 18 and 15. As for all drug abusers, the average age had increased from 37 to 38 and average age of first abuse remained at 18;

**Type of Drugs Abused**

- (g) in 2014, the number of reported narcotics analgesics abusers (at 4 581) continued to be lower than the number of psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (at 5 428). Among those newly reported, the number of PSAs (at 1 696) was much higher than the number of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 300);

- (h) comparing 2014 with 2013, the number of PSAs had lowered by 14% (from 6 303 to 5 428) and those taking narcotics analgesics (mainly heroin) decreased by 11% (from 5 127 to 4 581);
- (i) heroin remains to be the single most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers. However, the total number of reported heroin abusers in 2014 (at 4 579) was 11% lower than that in 2013 (at 5 125);
- (j) ketamine remains to be the most popular type of psychotropic substances abused. The number of reported ketamine abusers was 26% lower (from 2 922 in 2013 to 2 166 in 2014), 17% of whom aged under 21;
- (k) compared with 2013, the number of abusers of most of other types of PSAs had seen a reduction – methylenedioxymethamphetaamine (MDMA) (36% lower), cocaine (27% lower), triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone (10% lower) and cough medicine (10% lower), with the exception of nimetazepam (28% higher), cannabis (11% higher) and methamphetamine (9% higher);
- (l) the number of drug abusers taking more than one type of drugs in 2014 was 11% lower than that in 2013 (having decreased from 2 251 to 1 996); *[Note: 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.]*

#### Other Observations

- (m) the most common reasons for all drug abusers reported for taking drugs were to relieve boredom/depression/stress (46%), to identify with peers (45%), and to avoid discomfort of its absence (40%). For drug abusers 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 (31%);
- (n) 54% of the drug abusers were reported to have taken drugs at home/friend’s home only, another 27% at both home/friend’s home and other localities, and the remaining 20% at other localities only.

Among those young drug abusers aged under 21, the three most popular localities for taking drugs were home/friend's home (82%), public areas like recreation area/public garden/public toilet (27%), and non-party gathering in club house/building/hotel/bar (8%);

- (o) 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 and 56 times respectively. The corresponding figures for other types of PSAs were much lower, e.g. 30 times for cough medicine and MDMA abusers, 17 times for nimetazepam abusers, 15 times for methamphetamine abusers and 13 times for ketamine abusers; and
- (p) 76% of the reported drug abusers had previously been convicted. Among them, most had previous conviction of either drug-related offences only (38%) or both drug-related and other offences (28%), while 9% had previous conviction of other offences only.