

**For discussion on
4 May 2021**

Legislative Council Panel on Security

Drug Situation in Hong Kong in 2020

Purpose

This paper provides information to Members on the drug situation in Hong Kong in 2020 as reflected by the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) and other statistics, and on the Government's anti-drug efforts in response to the latest drug situation.

Background

2. 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 Students¹, 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

¹ The last Survey of Drug Use among Students was conducted in the 2017/18 school year. The Narcotics Division of the Security Bureau is currently conducting a new round of the Survey in the 2020/21 school year.

anti-drug policy and measures.

The Figures

CRDA Statistics

Profile of Drug Abusers

6. The key statistics on drug abusers reported to CRDA in 2020² are at **Annex**. There was a continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers in 2020 (at 5 569), 4% lower than that in 2019 (at 5 772). 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 6% (from 494 in 2019 to 525 in 2020). 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 2020 (at 1 423) was 12% lower than that in 2019 (at 1 617). Those aged under 21 decreased by 2% (from 387 in 2019 to 381 in 2020). The proportion of young adults aged 21-35 remained at a relatively high level (46% in both 2020 and 2019).

8. The drug history³ of newly reported cases still stood high. Half had a drug history of at least 5 years (5.7 years in 2019).

Types of Drugs Abused

9. The total number of reported psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (at 3 409) continued to be higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 2 842). The higher rate was more evident among the newly reported abusers (number of PSAs and narcotics analgesics abusers at 1 302 and 125 respectively). Heroin remained the single most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers, with the total number of reported abusers in 2020 (at 2 837) being 2% lower than that in 2019 (at 2 895). Methamphetamine (commonly known as “Ice”) continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance abused, followed by triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone and cannabis. The total number of reported “Ice” abusers decreased by 9% (from 1 343 in 2019 to 1 223 in 2020), and that of triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone abusers decreased by 19% (from 861 in 2019 to 698 in 2020). Cannabis took over cocaine and

² The figures for the drug situation in Hong Kong in 2020 will need to be viewed with caution as they might have been affected by the situation of COVID-19. For instance, reporting agencies might have come into contact with fewer drug abusers due to the pandemic, and might have taken more time to submit data of drug abusers to the CRDA. We will continue to closely monitor the figures in 2021 and the likely impact by the pandemic.

³ “Drug history” refers to the time for abusers to be reported to CRDA by reporting agencies from their first drug abuse.

became the third most popular psychotropic substance abused in 2020, the reported abusers of which increased by 29% (from 522 in 2019 to 673 in 2020). Cocaine became the fourth, with the number of reported abusers having decreased by 16% (from 791 in 2019 to 667 in 2020). Ketamine came fifth, with the number of reported abusers having increased by 18% (from 423 in 2019 to 499 in 2020).

10. For reported young drug abusers aged under 21, cannabis remained the most popular psychotropic substance abused, followed by cocaine and ketamine. There were increases to the number of reported abusers of cannabis (by 17%, from 235 in 2019 to 275 in 2020) and ketamine (by 69%, from 48 in 2019 to 81 in 2020). In contrast, the number of reported abusers of cocaine decreased by 13% (from 208 in 2019 to 182 in 2020).

11. Cannabis also replaced “Ice” to become the most popular drug abused among all newly reported drug abusers in 2020 (it ranked third in 2019), rising by 28% from 348 in 2019 to 444 in 2020. “Ice” now ranked second, with the number of newly reported abusers having decreased by 25% from 475 in 2019 to 357 in 2020. Cocaine ranked third (it ranked second in 2019), with the number of newly reported abusers having decreased by 16% from 398 in 2019 to 334 in 2020.

Reasons and Localities

12. 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, 56% of the reported drug abusers took drugs at home or friend’s home only.

Enforcement

13. Compared with 2019 (at 2 399), the total number of drug-related arrests in 2020 was 60% higher (at 3 849)⁴. The number of young people aged under 21 arrested for drug offences was 514, 97% higher than that in 2019 (at 261). Analysed by drug types, the highest proportion of all arrests in 2020 was “Ice”-related cases (22%), followed by cannabis-related cases (21%). The total number of defendants prosecuted for all drug offences was 32% lower (from 2 443 in 2019 to 1 657 in 2020), with 12 persons aged under 16 convicted of trafficking in dangerous drugs (11 in 2019).

14. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, various countries have imposed travel restrictions which led to a reduction in passenger travel. Traffickers of drugs made more use of air and sea freight in larger quantities, postal parcels. With strengthened intelligence analysis and enhanced law enforcement action, LEAs successfully seized approximately 5 600 kg of drugs in 2020, an increase of 75% compared to 2019

⁴ The Police have advised that since mid-June 2019, as substantial police resources had been deployed to handle large-scale public order events, the number of drug-related arrests in 2019 may not have fully reflected the situation of drug crimes in the year.

(around 3 200 kg).

Major Drug Trends

15. The following major drug trends have been observed based on the CRDA statistics and other relevant figures of 2020 –

- (a) **continued decline in the total number of reported drug abusers, but increased drug abuse among youngsters** – CRDA revealed that the total number of reported drug abusers continued to decline in 2020 (paragraph 6 above). However, the number of reported drug abusers aged under 21 increased in 2020, reflecting increased drug abuse among youngsters (paragraph 6 above). Among them, students accounted for 35%, as compared to 26% in 2019;
- (b) **continued relatively high proportion of newly reported abusers being young adults** – the proportion of newly reported drug abusers 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 and ketamine abuse** – while “Ice” continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance, the number of reported abusers decreased. On the other hand, the number of reported cannabis and ketamine abusers increased, especially among those aged under 21 (having increased by 17% and 69% respectively) (paragraphs 9 to 10 above). Being the most popular drug abused among young people aged under 21, cannabis also became the most popular drug abused among newly reported drug abusers in 2020 (registering an increase of 28%) (paragraph 11 above);
- (d) **hidden drug abuse remains a concern** – the median drug history of 5 years of newly reported cases (paragraph 8 above), and home/friend’s home only being the most common locality for drug taking (paragraph 12 above), call for continued attention to the issue of hidden drug abuse; and
- (e) **concern on young people’s involvement in drug offences** – law enforcement figures showed a significant rise in the number of drug arrestees in 2020 as compared to 2019, in particular those aged under 21 involved in drug offences (paragraph 13 above). While the number of drug-related arrests in 2019 might not have fully reflected the situation of drug crimes in the year due to the social unrest, it is worth noting that the number of young people aged under 21 arrested for drug offences in 2020 (at 514) also rose by 48% compared to 2018 (at 347). The involvement of young people in drug offences surely warrants attention.

Anti-drug Efforts

16. Our anti-drug policy and measures have 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 15 above, key anti-drug initiatives will be taken forward along the directions outlined below.

PE&P

17. The PE&P campaign will continue to enhance community awareness of the drug problem (especially the harms of cannabis and ketamine), 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, with greater emphasis on the use of social media and web-based platforms, so as to maximise the reach to different target groups, especially youths and young adults. Collaboration with different organisations (including Government bureaux/departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based 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. The Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau has also made use of its social media accounts to disseminate anti-drug messages. We will also continue to roll out suitable PE&P initiatives for ethnic minority groups so as to extend the reach of our anti-drug messages to different sectors of the community.

18. To cope with rising cannabis abuse especially that among young people, 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, rectifying mistaken concepts, and helping identify cannabis products. The Government has also taken a firm stance against the legalisation advocacy and sent a clear and unequivocal message to the public that the use, cultivation, manufacturing, trafficking, etc. of cannabis and controlled cannabis products are illegal and will remain so. The above efforts will continue in the future with more pervasive deployment of social media, web-based initiatives, animation and infographics, etc. which would be appealing to and easily accessible by the public and the younger generation. Moreover, with the wide range of products containing cannabidiol (CBD) (which is a cannabinoid with no known psychoactive effects and hence not controlled under the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (DDO) (Cap. 134)) available in the market, we will step up education in

this respect⁵ and make clear that cannabis and certain cannabinoids such as tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) are harmful and remain controlled dangerous drugs. On the other hand, ND will enhance PE&P efforts against ketamine noting the alarming rise in abuse of the drug. In particular, new television and radio announcements in the public interest (APIs) as well as animation and infographics are already in the pipeline for launch starting the second quarter of 2021.

19. In light of the rise in the number of young arrestees for drug offences, enhanced efforts will also be made to publicise the severe consequences of committing drug offences in Hong Kong. For example, ND and the Customs and Excise Department jointly produced and launched in April 2021 television and radio APIs with a view to reminding members of the public, especially youngsters, not to fall prey to drug trafficking syndicates by offering themselves as recipients of unknown parcels or cargo, or carrying unknown goods into and out of Hong Kong. In the Fourth Round of the Anti-drug Community Awareness Building Programme under the Beat Drugs Fund (BDF) launched on 1 April 2021 and implemented by 18 District Fight Crime Committees, dedicated funding has also been earmarked for activities/projects against drug trafficking to enhance public education at the district level.

20. The Hong Kong Jockey Club Drug InfoCentre (DIC) has been closed for renovation works starting 1 February 2021, which are expected to last for about 18 months. Before its closure, the average yearly attendance of DIC for 2016 to 2019 was about 38 000⁶. DIC will be holistically revamped with a new design theme, upgraded facilities and modernised exhibits, thus strengthening its functions of anti-drug education and enriching the visitation experience of members of the public. In the interim period, DIC's parental talks will continue through online means.

21. Schools remain an important platform for anti-drug education. Anti-drug training and programmes for teachers, school management personnel and students will be continued and strengthened. We will continue to encourage secondary schools to implement the Healthy School Programme with a Drug Testing Component, which aims at enhancing the physical and mental well-being of students and fostering their resolve to refuse drugs through participating in diversified personal growth activities and voluntary school drug testing, thereby promoting a healthy and drug-free school culture. Continued implementation of the enhanced "Beat Drugs with Sports" (previously known as "Participate in Sports, Stay Away from Drugs") Programme in the 2020/21 school year will assist in broadening the reach of anti-drug messages to secondary schools.

⁵ For instance, ND and the Department of Health jointly issued "Information on Cannabidiol (CBD) Products" in February 2021 to address certain commonly asked questions by members of the general public, importers and traders. It is available at: https://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/CBD_Information_Note_English.pdf.

⁶ In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, DIC was closed for various periods in 2020. The attendance of DIC in 2020 was around 3 200.

22. As for parental education, more anti-drugs elements have been incorporated in DIC's parental talks to enhance parents' knowledge of drugs and how to identify and help their children with drug problems. We will also collaborate with media (e.g. TV and radio stations) and websites (e.g. online parental platforms) targeting parents to enhance their knowledge of harmful effects of drugs and skills in helping children stay away from drugs.

T&R

23. The Government has 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 NGOs, community-based counselling centres for psychotropic substance abusers 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 centres by the Correctional Services Department.

24. After extensive consultation with relevant service units and stakeholders in the anti-drug sector, ND issued the "Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong for 2021 to 2023"⁷ (the Three-year Plan) in March 2021, with the aim of facilitating anti-drug service providers to review and develop their plans and programmes in the three-year period. The Three-year Plan has been widely promulgated in the anti-drug sector and made available on ND's website for public consumption. We will, in partnership with relevant parties, continue to oversee and coordinate efforts as appropriate in pursuing initiatives according to the strategic directions set out in the Three-year Plan.

BDF

25. BDF, with a capital base of HK\$3.35 billion and a balance standing at around HK\$4.2 billion by the end of March 2020⁸, has been providing sustainable financial source to support worthwhile anti-drug projects. Since its establishment, BDF has funded over 1 700 projects covering PE&P, T&R and research at the territory-wide and district levels, with a total grant of over HK\$1.9 billion up to April 2021. The Governing Committee of the BDF Association will continue to take into account

⁷ The "Three-year Plan on Drug Treatment and Rehabilitation Services in Hong Kong for 2021 to 2023" is available at:

https://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/three_year_plan_2021_2023_final_en.pdf.

⁸ The annual financial statement and annual reports of the BDF Association ended 31 March 2020 are available at the following website:

https://www.nd.gov.hk/pdf/Reports_and_Financial_Statements_2020.pdf.

the latest drug situation and the advice of ACAN to 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

26. 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 DDO 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 LEAs in Hong Kong could respond effectively to the latest drug developments. In April 2021, we briefed this Panel on the proposed amendments to DDO and CCO on bringing eight new dangerous drugs and one new precursor chemical under statutory control. We will continue to initiate legislative amendments to bring new substances under control, in view of the domestic situation and international control requirements and practices.

27. 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 and on-line patrol, and adopting other measures to combat drug trafficking. In particular, LEAs will endeavour to track down drug syndicates exploiting youngsters and invoke section 56A of DDO⁹ to seek enhanced sentencing on such syndicates, hence achieving a stronger deterrent effect.

28. 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 as well as conducting intelligence exchange and joint enforcement operations, to combat drug trafficking.

Advice Sought

29. Members are invited to note this paper.

⁹ Section 56A of DDO empowers the court, where it is satisfied with evidence that an adult has involved a minor in the commission of a drug-related offence and if it thinks fit, to pass a more severe sentence on the convicted adult offender.

**Narcotics Division
Security Bureau
April 2021**

**Key Statistics Reported to
Central Registry of Drug Abuse in 2020**

Profile of Drug Abusers

- (1) the total number of reported drug abusers in 2020 was 5 569, 4% lower than that in 2019 (at 5 772);
- (2) the number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 recorded an increase by 6% (from 494 to 525). Students accounted for 35% of reported drug abusers of that age group in 2020, compared to 26% in 2019;
- (3) the number of newly reported drug abusers in 2020 (at 1 423) was 12% lower than that in 2019 (at 1 617). Among them, those aged under 21 decreased by 2% (from 387 to 381), while those aged 21 and above decreased by 15% (from 1 230 to 1 042). The proportion of young adults aged 21-35 remained at a relatively high level (46% in both 2020 and 2019);
- (4) half of the newly reported abusers in 2020 had abused drugs for at least 5 years (5.7 years in 2019). Among the newly reported young drug abusers aged under 21, half had abused drugs for at least 1.2 years (1 year in 2019);
- (5) the number of male abusers fell by 4% (from 4 602 to 4 411), and the number of female abusers fell by 1% (from 1 170 to 1 158);
- (6) compared with 2019, 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 2020, the number of reported psychotropic substance abusers (PSAs) (at 3 409) continued to be higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 2 842). Among those newly reported, the number of PSAs (at 1 302) was considerably higher than that of narcotics analgesics abusers (at 125);
- (8) compared with 2019, the number of PSAs reduced by 6% (from 3 612 to 3 409), while that of the narcotics analgesics abusers (vast majority being heroin abusers) decreased by 2% (from 2 898 to 2 842);
- (9) heroin remained the single most popular type of drug abused among the reported abusers, with the total number of reported abusers in 2020 (at 2 837) 2% lower than that in 2019 (at 2 895);

- (10) methamphetamine (commonly known as “Ice”) continued to be the most popular psychotropic substance abused in 2020. Compared with 2019, the number of reported “Ice” abusers decreased by 9% (from 1 343 to 1 223), with 4% of whom aged under 21. Triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone came second while cannabis came third. The number of reported triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone abusers decreased by 19% (from 861 to 698), with less than 0.5% of whom aged under 21. The number of reported cannabis abusers was 29% higher (from 522 to 673) than that in 2019, with 41% of whom aged under 21. Cocaine was the fourth, with the number of reported abusers having decreased by 16% (from 791 to 667). Ketamine came as the fifth, with the number of reported abusers having increased by 18% (from 423 to 499);
- (11) compared with 2019, the numbers of reported abusers of other major types of psychotropic substances were as follows: cough medicine having dropped by 19% (from 271 to 220); MDMA having increased by 18% (from 39 to 46) and nimetazepam having increased by 93% (from 14 to 27);
- (12) for reported young drug abusers aged under 21, the number of cannabis abusers increased by 17% (from 235 in 2019 to 275 in 2020); that of cocaine abusers decreased by 13% (from 208 in 2019 to 182 in 2020); that of ketamine abusers increased by 69% (from 48 in 2019 to 81 in 2020); while that of “Ice” abusers decreased by 33% (from 70 in 2019 to 47 in 2020);
- (13) the number of drug abusers taking more than one type of drugs in 2020 was 10% lower than that in 2019 (from 1 336 to 1 205)¹;

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 (34%). For young drug abusers aged under 21, to identify with peers (54%) was the most common reason for taking drugs, followed by to relieve boredom/depression/stress (42%) and to seek euphoria or sensory satisfaction (29%);
- (15) 56% of the reported drug abusers took drugs at home/friend’s home only,

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.

another 20% 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 (54%), public areas like recreation area/public park/public toilet (21%) and party gathering in club house/building/hotel/bar (21%);

- (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, 13 times for "Ice" abusers, 10 times for ketamine abusers, 9 times for nimetazepam abusers, 7 times for cocaine abusers and 4 times for cannabis and MDMA 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 (35%) or both drug-related and other offences (24%), while 10% had previous convictions of other offences only.
