

Monitoring Recent Changes of Cross-Border Drug Use and Their Implications for Prevention/Control Strategies

Executive Summary

Background

Cross-border drug use has continued to be a serious concern of the law enforcement agencies in both Hong Kong and Guangdong. In 2011, there were 821, or one in every thirteen, drug abusers being reported to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) for taking drugs in the Mainland (mainly in Shenzhen), of whom 87.8% were adults aged 21 or above. According to Guangdong Narcotics Bureau Annual Report of 2015, there are a total of 464 Hong Kong/Macau drug users arrested in Guangdong in the past 17 months, which is much higher than before.

Although cross-border drug use has become a social problem in Hong Kong with the continual economic and social integration of the Pearl River Delta area, most previous local research on this topic has focused mainly on drug-taking behavior of the younger ages (Cheung, Lee and Tang 2001) and they were conducted in earlier years (e.g. Lau 2003). What happened in recent years and for different sociodemographic groups? It calls for new studies to investigate the current situation and patterns of cross-border drug activities among Hong Kong citizens and to explore the recent social changes or policy shifts that might affect the cross-border drug use.

Objectives

Our research aims to explore and monitor the recent changes of cross-border drug use in Hong Kong and to evaluate the current cross-border drug policies through both qualitative and quantitative methods. It can make contributions to the existing “e-Drug Stats” (quantitative) and “Drug Intelligence” (qualitative) modules and provide suggestions on new policy makings.

- (1) To describe the latest trend of cross-border drug use and its socio-political-legal context;
- (2) To investigate whether there are any distinctions, in terms of their behaviour pattern and socioeconomic background, between the current cross-border drug users and those before the Mainland law enforcers stepped up their anti-drug efforts as a response to the former chief executive’s call in 2008/9;
- (3) To examine the effects of the recent custom/police strategies in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen to prevent/control cross-border drug use;
- (4) To combine various sources and establish an online cross-border drug use database to continuously monitor the situation.

Methods

At the first stage, a variety of qualitative methods are used to capture a relatively complete picture of recent cross-border substance abuse by collecting information from law-enforcers who deal

with this issue directly and routinely in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Data collection mainly involves two sources: (1) archival research in both cities in order to get the official statistics, internal reports and policy documents related to substance users with Hong Kong citizenship; (2) 33 interviews with drug-control legal practitioners in HK/Shenzhen in order to account for the official archives, to get familiar with the legal environment and social background of the cases. With the help of 6 anti-drug NGOs in Hong Kong, we also interviewed 30 drug users in Hong Kong who have previous cross-border drug use experience and 8 social workers who are familiar with the recent situations of cross-border drug use.

The second stage of this study is a moderate scale survey at the Land Border concerning patterns of cross-border drug use and their attitudes toward anti-drug policies. The target participants of this self-report survey are cross-border travelers who are Hong Kong citizens in the age group of 18-50 at Lo Wu, Lok Ma Chau (spur line), Lo Ma Chau, and Shenzhen Bay crossings. Due to the lack of the full list of all cross-border HK citizens, the research team chooses non-probability sampling method. In order to include different subgroups of the cross-border respondents and reach more potential drug users, convenience sampling, quota sampling and purposive sampling are combined here. The final sample size is 1,461 (after excluding invalid questionnaires) and 81 drug users are reached.

Some Key Findings

The main findings of this study include the followings:

- (1) After 2008, the crackdown on youths' cross-border drug activities at both sides (mainly deterrence policies in Shenzhen and educational measures in Hong Kong) are effective and currently there are fewer young people going to Shenzhen to use drugs;
- (2) Majority of young drug users now choose psychoactive drugs (affordable in Hong Kong and no need to go to Shenzhen for saving costs) and they also use such drugs with their local friends in Hong Kong, leading to the further reduction of cross-border drug use among youth;
- (3) The current cross-border drug users mainly use recreational drugs and include various age-sex-occupation groups, which is consistent with the global trend (recreational drug use will become normalized and extend to various social classes and socio-demographic groups);
- (4) Among all cross-border drug users, the dominant ones are lower-class adult males and their drug activities are likely to co-occur with drinking and sexual risk behaviors, together with their friends.

Policy Implications

- (1) Future policies need to address the multiple health risks considering the co-occurrence of cross-border drug use, alcohol use and sex activities.
- (2) The relevant agencies in Hong Kong can use extralegal measures to strengthen the collaboration between Hong Kong and Shenzhen due to the constrains of the current legal framework in Hong Kong, such as providing drug rehabilitation service for Hong Kong drug users arrested in Shenzhen.
- (3) To reduce the cross-border drug use, policy makers need to consider the heterogeneity of the current cross-border drug users and especially should allocate more anti-drug resources to lower class adult males in Hong Kong.