

Executive summary

This report presents the key findings and recommendations from a study funded by the Beat Drugs Fund Association, titled "The Prevalence and Factors Associated with Post-release Substance Use in Ex-offenders in Hong Kong." The aim of this study is to examine the prevalence and associated characteristics of drug use among ex-offenders after their release from prison. It also seeks to explore the risk factors and protective factors that influence ex-offenders' drug use patterns and assess the role of methadone drug treatment.

The study was conducted between November 2020 and September 2023, with 247 ex-offenders meeting the inclusion criteria being recruited: (1) have a history of a criminal conviction, (2) have a history of drug misuse, (3) aged 18 or above, and (4) proficient in the Cantonese dialect (speaking and listening). Respondents were divided into three groups based on their drug misuse status, including "Methadone treatment", "Current drug users", and "Recovered". The respondents completed quantitative questionnaires covering various areas relating to drug abuse, addiction treatment, and attitudes towards drug-related crime while 40 of the respondents were selected to participate in an interview to further investigate their drug use behaviors. The literature review highlighted the significant link between perceived social support, well-being, adverse childhood experiences, and drug abuse. To measure these factors, the study utilized established tools including Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, PERMA-Profilier, Adverse Childhood Experiences Scale, the Severity of Dependence Scale, Contemplation Ladder, and Stimulant Relapse Risk Scale. Each scale is designed to assess a specific aspect related to drug abuse and its potential impact on individuals.

Among the 247 ex-offenders, 84 were current drug abusers indicating that the prevalence of post-

release substance use among our respondents was 33.2%. The prevalence of post-release substance use among male respondents (38.0%) was much higher than that among female respondents (12.8%). Key findings from the study revealed curiosity, peer influence, and the desire to escape negative emotions as primary motivators for initial drug use. Peer influence and boredom were identified as significant factors in continued drug abuse, while concerns about health impact, adverse effects on daily life, and family-related considerations were the primary drivers for the desire to stop drug abuse. The study also highlighted the influential role of social support in the recovery process, with the "Recovered" group reporting higher levels of received social support compared to other groups. Adverse childhood experiences were found to be prevalent among the respondents, suggesting a potential association with the risk of drug abuse.

Based on these findings, there are several key points for the respondents to reintegrate to society, (1) Employment support, (2) Establishing positive social networks, (3) Enhance resilience, and (4) Having a goal-oriental life were put forth. The study emphasized the importance of community-based residential rehabilitation centers and halfway houses in supporting individuals who have recently undergone treatment and preventing relapse. Employment support was identified as crucial in addressing issues such as boredom and facilitating the development of positive social connections. Strategies to reduce stigma in the workplace and opportunities for vocational training and job referrals were recommended. To prevent the risk of drug relapse, the adoption of peer support services is advised to help individuals establish positive relationships in the community and break the cycle of poor social support networks. The study also highlighted the significance of comprehensive drug education programs, promoting social inclusion, and adopting a trauma-informed approach within social services to address adverse childhood experiences.

The report concluded by emphasizing the need for preventive measures targeting young individuals, including drug education programs and programs fostering positive peer influence. Despite limitations such as a limited sample size and potential selection bias, the study provided valuable insights into the experiences of ex-offenders and offered recommendations for supporting their reintegration into society and preventing substance use. Further research with larger representative samples and specific populations is recommended.