

A LONGITUDINAL SURVEY OF PSYCHOACTIVE DRUG ABUSERS IN HONG KONG

Executive Summary

- (1) This is a longitudinal survey of psychoactive drug abusers in Hong Kong over a period of three years, from early 2009 to end of 2011. It is part of the larger “Socioeconomic and Health Impacts of Substance Abuse in Hong Kong—A Longitudinal Study” funded by the Beat Drugs Fund and conducted with the objectives of (i) finding the factors that may be conducive to psychoactive drug abuse, (ii) examining the harmful effects of abusing psychoactive substances in a group of identified drug abusers, and (iii) assessing the economic impact of psychoactive drug abuse on the society.
- (2) The survey recruited a sample of psychoactive drug abusers from agencies, and followed up on them for a total of six interviews, spaced out at six-month intervals. As many as thirty-six youth outreach agencies and drug T&R programmes have heavily participated in the survey. Subjects were recruited from most of these agencies, and the social worker staff of many of these agencies also served as interviewers. The selection criterion of subjects was “having ever used a psychoactive drug”. The definition of “psychotropic drug” used by the Narcotics Division was adopted for this survey. The sample size of the baseline survey at T1 was 754, and that of the last interview at T6 was 288.
- (3) The analytical framework involves the testing of a host of socio-demographic and psycho-social variables to determine if they might be conducive to the use of psychoactive drugs in the last 30 days before the interview. The model was examined for each time-point, followed by a cross-time-point analysis. The harmful effects of psychoactive drugs on health were also examined on the basis of the survey data. A small-scale exercise to estimate for the social costs involved in T&R, counseling, preventive education, and research work in Hong Kong for the year 2010 was also performed, on the basis of information on expenditure provided by related government departments and NGOs.
- (4) Logistic regressions conducted for each time-point and then across time-points showed that the most significant socio-demographic variables affecting drug use were “student status” (whether the subject was a student actively attending school) and employment (whether subject had a job if he/she was not a student). The most significant psycho-social variables were “permissiveness to drug use” and “life satisfaction”. The former even exerted influence on drug use at the next time-points. “Drug use” at one time-point also affected drug use at the next or even further time-points.
- (5) Four drug use paths from T1 to T6 were identified (Drug-free from T1 to T6; Eventually drug-free at T6; Eventually non-drug-free at T6; and Non-drug-free from T1 to T6). The way these drug use paths were affected by socio-demographic variables and psycho-social variables was quite similar to how drug use was affected by these variables in each of the time-points. Overall, the influence of socio-demographic variables was smaller than

psycho-social variables. Permissiveness to drug use, having found a goal in life and satisfaction with life are the psycho-social variables that affected drug use paths most.

- (6) The subjects did not perceive very positive health conditions of themselves, and a majority of them admitted that their health conditions had become worse since starting to use psychoactive drugs. Apart from suffering a variety of cognitive and psychological impairments such as poor memory, insomnia, low-spiritedness, lack of concentration, shaking hands, and increased suspicion, some of them had also developed medical conditions such as stomach-ache, urethritis, and bladder problems.
- (7) Based on the expenditure information provided by relevant government departments and NGOs, the total social cost on T&R, counseling, preventive education, and research was estimated to be HK\$301.42 million for the year 2010. The cost per capita was \$42.70. Costs pertaining to the domains of health care, welfare, criminal justice system, employment and productivity, etc. have not been estimated in this study. A previous study of social costs of drug abuse in Hong Kong (Cheung et al., 2000) estimated that the cost of these other domains was 6 times greater than that of the domain of drug work. Thus, the various areas of drug work are cost saving efforts in society.
- (8) On the basis of the findings, a number of recommendations are proposed as follows:
 - i) Reduce the level of permissiveness to drug use in young drug users, focusing on helping them to break the habit of drug use in their daily lives, and getting rid of the “bad habitization” attitude which deceives them into thinking that the consequences of psychoactive drug abuse are not serious.
 - ii) Raise the life satisfaction of young drug users by making school life more enjoyable so as to compete with the deviant peer subculture to which students detached from school would easily turn to.
 - iii) Keep students in school as far as possible, as being in school reduces the opportunities to be involved in drugs and other risk behaviours, and the drug prevention atmosphere has taken shape in many secondary schools since the implementation of the trial scheme on student drug test in 2009.
 - iv) Monitor and be prepared to tackle the spread of psychoactive drug abuse among young people in various socio-demographic and occupational subgroups, given rise by the increasing worldwide trend of “normalization of recreational drug use”.
 - v) As the effects of socio-demographic and psycho-social variables on drug use were only short-term (i.e., mostly confined to the same time-point), any negative effects of these variables at one time-point would not likely to be carried over to affect drug use at the next time-point. That means there is always room for better intervention work at a new time-point to be done that could reduce the likelihood of drug use at the new time-point.
 - vi) Identify early adverse health symptoms caused by psychoactive drug abuse, especially stomach problems in the case of ketamine abuse, among students and working youths. In this regard, parents, teachers, social workers/counselors, and employers could play a role in early identification and intervention.
 - vii) Commission a full-fledged study of the social costs of psychoactive drug abuse.