

**Research Report on
Cross-Boundary Substance Abuse Problem
among Youths in Hong Kong**

Executive Summary

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I. BACKGROUND

Substance abuse among youths in Hong Kong has been an important social issue that raises the concern of many people in the society. Increasing prevalence of abusing substances among the youth has been reported (e.g., Cheung & Ch'ien, 1996; Lau et al., 2002; Lee, Hollinrake, & Ng, 1998) and some preliminary data also showed that there is a trend of crossing the boundary from Hong Kong to mainland China for substance use (e.g., 香港社會服務聯會, 2001; Lau et al., 2002). However, very few, if any, large-scale studies have been conducted on the topic in Hong Kong and internationally.

This report contains three parts: Part I summarizes the results obtained from a quantitative study on the cross-boundary travelers recruited at the Lo Wu checkpoint, Part II is a supplementary qualitative study (four focus group discussion were conducted), and Part III is a synthesis and recommendations of the entire study.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the study are:

- 1). to obtain the profiles of cross-boundary substance abusers regarding their background characteristics;
- 2). to provide a better portrait on the reasons of substance abuse across the boundary, drug use pattern, knowledge and attitude towards substance abuse, etc. among cross-boundary substance abusers; and
- 3). to recommend appropriate strategies and relevant preventive education and publicity measures to tackle the problem.

III. STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The study population included Hong Kong Chinese young adults of age 18 to 30, who had used psychoactive substances and/or heroin in mainland China (for simplicity, psychoactive substances and heroin are referred to as “drugs” in this report). Respondents were invited to participate in the study when they returned to Hong Kong from mainland China via the Lo Wu checkpoint during the data collection period. The survey was conducted from 18 November to 17 December 2002 (from 10am to 7pm everyday). A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from the respondents. A total of 11,497 eligible respondents were contacted and 6,420 completed the entire study. In brief, the response rate, defined as the number of respondents who completed the survey divided by the total number of eligible individuals contacted, was hence approximately 56%.

For Part II of the study (the qualitative study), a total of four focus groups, two for age 18-20 (one male and one female groups), and the other two for age 21-30 (one male and one female groups) were conducted. For males, there were 8 participants of age 18-20 and 6 of age 21-29. For females, there were 6 participants of age 18-20 and 5 of age 21-26.. All participants had experiences of using drugs in mainland China in the last 12 months, most of them did so in Hong Kong as well. None of them used drugs for less than 6 months. These informants were recruited from social workers’ referral and invitation at the Lo Wu checkpoint among those who had participated in the quantitative study. Interviews were conducted in December 2002 and January 2003.

IV. LIMITATIONS

The quantitative study is limited in a number of ways. First, since the sample of the survey was not a random sample, results of the survey may not be generalizable to the entire

cross-boundary travelers of the same age group. It however, brings new insights to the relevant problem and is one of the few studies of the kind. Further research is mandated. Secondly, due to the limitation of the study design, no prevalence of the cross-boundary drug abuse problem could be estimated and the study was descriptive in nature. Thirdly, the overall response rate of the study was not too high, though it was comparable to quite a few studies (of various topics) carried out in Hong Kong (e.g., Brieger, Yip, Hin, & Chung, 1996; Chou, Mak, Chung, & Ho, 1996; Lau & Siah, 2001; Lau & Thomas, 2001; Lau & Tsui, 2003; Tang, 1998; Wong & So, 2003).

As regards the qualitative study, there are also some limitations. For instance, participants are not randomly selected and the sample size is quite small. Hence, the results may not be generalizable to the target population. Yet, it provides supplementary information that could not easily be captured by the quantitative survey.

V. SOME KEY FINDINGS

Background characteristics of respondents who used drugs in mainland China

Of all respondents who completed both parts of the quantitative survey (n=6,420, with 5,138 males and 1,282 females), 1,167 males and 122 females had used drugs in mainland China in the last 12 months (PDC).

The quantitative study showed that female PDC tended to be younger than male PDC.

About 36% of the male PDC were of age 18-20, whereas nearly 61% of the female PDC were of age 18-20. The corresponding figures for the age groups 21-25 and 26-30 were 42% and 21.9% respectively for male PDC, and 33.6% and 5.7% for female PDC. The majority (over 85% for both genders) of the PDC had attained F.1 to F.5 education. Quite a

few of the PDC were unemployed (17.1% for males and 24% for females), and about 72% and 54% respectively of the male and female PDC were employed full-time. A substantial proportion was not earning any income (about 20% and 36% for male and female PDC respectively). Most of the PDC had spent at least one day staying over in mainland China in the last month (about 90% for males and 77% for females).

Experience of drug use in mainland China

In the quantitative study, about one third of the PDC (both males and females) had used drugs in mainland China for one year or more, about 48% of the male PDC and 36% of the female PDC had done so for less than 6 months. About 67% of PDC for both genders had first used drugs in the mainland China within 12 months before enumeration.

Frequency of drug use in the last month

The quantitative study showed that a significant proportion of the PDC used drugs 1-2 times (38% for males and 39% for females), followed by none (34% for both genders), in the last month. Around 28% of the male PDC and 27% of the female PDC had used drugs for 3 times or more in the last month.

From the quantitative study, it can be seen that as compared to those drug users who had only used drugs outside mainland China in the last 12 months (DOC), PDC were more likely to have had used drugs in the last month. Over half of the DOC (about 56% of both males and females) reported that they did not use drugs in the last month (as compared to about 34% of the PDC).

Some participants of the focus group discussion (the qualitative study) pointed out that they used to abuse drugs more frequently in the past.

Reasons for using drugs in mainland China

Results of the quantitative study showed that lower price, peer influences, and better availability were important reasons for using drugs in mainland China. The three reasons totally accounted for 74% and 79% of the choices of male and female PDC respectively. In general, those younger were more attracted by the lower price of drugs in mainland China, whereas peer influence was cited by older respondents as a more important reason for using drugs in mainland China. Of all PDC, over 60% (63% for males and 68% for females) mentioned that they had at least one friend who frequently used drugs in mainland China. Similar figures were lower among male DOC (52%) and female DOC (40%).

Similar reasons for using drugs in mainland China were also obtained from informants of the qualitative study. In addition, these informants mentioned the better atmosphere of using drugs in mainland China and relatively lenient law enforcement regarding drug use in mainland China as their reasons for choosing to use drugs there.

Types of drugs used in mainland China

The quantitative study showed that the most commonly used type of drug was ecstasy (MDMA), which was used by over 80% of the PDC (around 87% of the male PDC and 81% of the female PDC). Ketamine and Cannabis also were common types of drugs used by the respondents. A substantial proportion of PDC also reported having used methylamphetamine (19% for males and 22% for females) and heroin (11% for males and 8% for females).

Similar findings with respect to the types of drugs used in mainland China were obtained from the qualitative study.

Further, the quantitative study also showed that a high percentage of the PDC (81% for males and 69% for females) reported that they had used more than one type of drugs in mainland China in the last 12 months.

From informants of the qualitative study, drug-mixing behaviors are common, such as mixing MDMA with Ketamine, or mixing MDMA pills of different ingredients, etc..

Venue of drug use in mainland China

From the quantitative study, as expected, disco (or rave party) was the most common venue for using drugs in mainland China. Other venues include bar, hotel, home/friend's home, etc..

From informants of the qualitative study, drug use in mainland China also took place in game centers, cyber-café's, etc..

Source of drugs and with whom drugs were used in mainland China

Results of the quantitative study revealed that supply of free drugs was very common. Over half of the PDC (55% of males and 62% of females) stated that the drugs used in the last episode of drug use in mainland China were supplied by their friends free of charge, 9% of male PDC and 16% of female PDC even obtained them free of charge from strangers. Drug use was usually accompanied by friends.

Perceptions related to drug use

The quantitative study showed that a large proportion of PDC (87% for both genders) believed that they were able to quit using drugs. Such perceptions prevailed among both PDC and DOC. About one-third of PDC (for both genders) perceived that taking drugs would be very easily or easily addictive and one-third the contrary. About 58% and 50% of

the male PDC and female PDC respectively perceived that drug use was quite/very harmful. A substantial proportion (64.3% for male PDC and 51.8% for female PDC) perceived that drug use had severe negative impact on their health.

Other perceptions related to drug use in mainland China

The quantitative study showed that drugs were thought to be more available in mainland China by a fairly large proportion of the PDC (about 60% of the male PDC and 40% of the female PDC).

The quantitative study also showed that the majority of the PDC believed that they had no chance at all (29% for males and 25% for females) or little chance (about 55% for both males and females) to be arrested in mainland China due to drug use.

Other drug-related behaviors

Results of the quantitative study showed that many PDC reported consuming alcohol before taking drugs (73% of the male PDC and 61% of the female PDC had consumed alcohol before taking drugs in the last episode of drug use). Having sexual intercourse after taking drugs also was common. About 43% of the male PDC and 29% of the female PDC reported having done so in their last episode of drug use.

VI. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lower price and better availability were important reasons for choosing to use drugs in mainland China. Many mentioned that it is much easier to obtain drugs in mainland China than in Hong Kong. Those younger or having no income were particularly attracted by the lower price of drugs in mainland China. In addition, peer influence was also a key factor

for using drugs in mainland China.

Similar findings were also obtained from the qualitative study. In fact, some informants of the qualitative study mentioned that they sometimes felt under pressure to conform to their peers to abuse drugs (in mainland China).

Programs teaching relevant skills to deal with this kind of peer pressure are therefore warranted.

About 14% of the male PDC and 16% of the female PDC perceived that drug use was not quite/not harmful. About one-third of PDC (for both genders) perceived that taking drugs would hardly/very hardly be addictive. Such misconceptions should be rectified in drug preventive education programs.

Despite the fact that a substantial number of PDC perceived that drug use is easily/very easily addictive, most of them believed that they could quit using drugs (87% or so of both male PDC and female PDC). It is possible that these respondents tended to believe that they were much able to control themselves and to quit drug use anytime they want.

Moreover, the enforcement of law against drug use in mainland China was perceived as less stringent by many respondents. In fact, the majority of PDC (80% or so) believed that they had no chance at all or low chance of being arrested in mainland China due to drug use. Co-operation with the mainland authorities about law enforcement, control and regular inspection of entertainment venues that are popular for drug use is much needed.

Mixing drugs behaviors were noted in a sizeable proportion of PDC. Heroin was also used by a fairly high percentage of the PDC. Moreover, drug use behavior was found to be

associated with other risk behaviors such as having sexual intercourse or alcohol consumption. Such could further complicate the tackling of the drug abuse problem.

Data obtained from informants of the qualitative study provide some insights for discouraging cross-boundary abuse among these young adults. Whereas curiosity and peer influences were factors initiating and keeping (cross-boundary) drug abuse, personal growth was mentioned as a crucial factor for reducing (or stopping) the behavior.

A holistic approach is therefore warranted.

A number of areas that need special attention (e.g., relationship with sex, co-operation with the mainland authorities on controlling drug supply and law enforcement) and further investigation (e.g., the cross-boundary drug users may not be a homogeneous group such as those heroin-users may be a group different from users of other drugs) in order to tackle the cross-boundary abuse problem have been pointed out. It is also believed that in order to better understand the cross-boundary abuse problem, a surveillance system should be established.

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