

Initiation, Continuation and Impact of Drug Use Among Females

Executive Summary

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This study was undertaken in response to the growing public concern about the rise of drug use among females. The reasons for this rise are partly connected to the overall rise in psychotropic drug use and can be understood at two distinct levels. At one level, these drugs have become embedded in the global and local youth and music culture. In part, the global youth scene has greatly impacted and shaped the nature and problems associated with teen and young adult drug use in Hong Kong. Yet as we describe in this report, young people's use of these drugs is no longer solely confined to the dance scene, but has surfaced in other social arenas, and is linked to larger issues about the ways in which young people are coping with the strains and pressures in a society placing high expectations on educational attainment, and at the same time, offering limited opportunities for personal youth development and employment.

At the more personal or individual level and in the context of the wide availability of psychotropic drugs today in Hong Kong, peer pressure is often cited as one of the major factors related to the increase and raises important considerations for designing public education campaigns.

This report examines the initiation, continuation, and impact of drug use among female users, and their outreach and treatment experiences. The report addresses these issues and offers recommendations. Given the sensitive nature of the study, it is virtually impossible to obtain a representative sample of the drug using population. So although our study can provide a portrait of the nature of drug use, the findings must be interpreted with caution and can't be generalized to the larger female drug population. Another limitation of the study is our underestimation of the extent of poly-drug use. We found poly-drug use across all three data sets fairly extensive, and this introduced problems in trying to understand the single and combined effects of different drugs. With these limitations in mind, we offer the following highlights from the study:

Initiation into Drug Use

- Peer and partner influence, rebellion, curiosity, excitement and adventure, and a belief that drugs are not addictive are observed as overall reasons for females trying drugs. For ice and ecstasy, belief that the effects from the drugs – increased physical energy and appetite depressant - improve their appearance. For heroin users, traumatic life events and family and school pressures were also important factors for trying it. Ketamine and heroin seen as a potential source to effectively escape from pressures and boredom related to school and family life.
- Initial use was often in the context with partners or small groups of friends.

Continuation with Drug Use

- Importantly, these findings are from the point of view of users and represent their subjective experiences and understandings, however, it may not necessarily reflect the realities of using drugs. Moreover, their subjective understanding of the motivations, expectations, and effects of drugs derive from and perpetuated in the local drug culture which de-emphasizes the negative aspects of drug use. One common motivation across all user groups is an appreciation for the medicinal quality and effects of drugs. The “medicine” has a numbing effect to cope with teen and adult female problems. Additionally, for female heroin users, they report liking the feeling of comfort and well being brought on by heroin, which allows them to escape from ongoing problems, usually related to drug use. From the perspective of ice users, an important factor for continuing is the drug’s slimming effect. Also, ice, from their point of view, is seen as a neutralizer and cure for heroin. It is appreciated for its ability to provide concentration and energy in getting various tasks and jobs accomplished. Some users also perceive that it provides them with increased confidence for communicating and socializing with others. Ice users also believe it is not addictive. Ecstasy and ketamine users are motivated to continue using these drugs because of its perceived non-addictive qualities, ability to give them “freedom” and pleasure, and its relative cheap cost. Some ketamine users also find the drug as a source to relieve the boredom and mundane qualities associated with school.

Consequences of Drug Use

- All user groups, but especially heroin and ice users experienced a number of negative health and relational consequences, particularly in relation to mental health, physical health, involvement in crime, violence and arrests and convictions.
- According to respondents, immediate and beneficial effects of drug use included the escape from problems and perceived improvements in appearance.

Outreach and Treatment Experiences

- Heroin and ice users tend to have tried to quit, access and experience treatment more so than ecstasy and ketamine users. The latter two groups do not perceive their use as problematic as the drug is seen as non-addictive. Moreover, these two groups believe that their use is controlled and occasional.
- For those experiencing treatment, most had tried several times to quit. Their entry into treatment was most often prompted by a court order, and therefore, their treatment process was involuntary.
- Parents are seen as the major and most important source of support before, during and after the treatment process.
- Obstacles impeding recovery include partner’s use, poor controls over emotions, the myths associated with local drug culture, negative peers, and the belief that drugs can make one thin and beautiful.

Discussion and Recommendations

- Motivations to change vary among users such that less motivated users may impede the efforts of those who want to make changes. Two strategies are recommended to address this issue. One method would involve ways of integrating a treatment approach which channels the strong characters of the “big sisters” into a positive way and which helps build the confidence of those who want to make changes. Another strategy would entail developing a more coordinated diagnostic procedure at the time of sentencing such that different types of female users would be placed in settings designed specifically to deal with particularly types of users and their motivations to change.
- Develop education activities which take on the paradox of using drugs to attain beauty and it’s reverse effects. In relation to this, physical and endurance training are an important vehicle for promoting a healthy “appearance,” and are noted by our treatment respondents as worthwhile.
- Further examination and development of strategies targeting emotion management.
- Although female users report problems with family, it is parents who, female users identify, as the major source of support in trying to quit – from the point of making decisions to quit as well as during and after treatment. Parents can and do make the difference. Although they may perceive themselves as being helpless in helping their daughters, they are not. However, they need guidance by drug workers and in public education campaigns, such that they fully understand, like users themselves, that treatment is not a “quick fix” but is in fact an ongoing, lifetime recovery process.

Education

The findings from this study point to a number of important educational issues, particularly peer pressure, notions of beauty, and knowledge about drugs and their effects. In the U.K., the U.S. and Australia, the “just say no” approach in public education campaigns has been shown to be ineffective and unrealistic. Public media campaigns should move beyond the “just say no,” approach as many young people see this as “naïve,” particularly in light of peer pressure. A realistic educational strategy entails the following dimensions and are offered as part of our recommendations:

- As part of its education campaign, peer group education is an important and realistic component. Moreover, outreach workers could promote the use of a “peer watch” system in which users monitor and regulate each others’ use to reduce the harms associated with drug use. As noted by the respondents in this study, many female users use in small groups together, and some of them report monitoring and controlling each other’s use.

- Education should also focus particularly to notions about beauty and appearance. As has been well documented throughout the report, female drug users find drugs like ice and ecstasy as providing the means for “being beautiful,” irrespective of its negative consequences. At present, girls and young women are heavily influenced by images of beauty that are associated with being thin. Unfortunately drugs are perceived as a “quick” method for achieving beauty. Educational campaigns must cultivate a healthy concept of “beauty, ” and should emphasize the paradox of drugs in the attainment of beauty as the respondents in this study described how they initially perceived their use as enhancing their beauty, but eventually, the drugs made them feel “ugly.”
- Educational campaigns should also target the reasons why drug users try to quit, including court orders, ties to family and tiring of one’s addiction. Ex-users and their experiences would be an important and realistic part of the campaign.
- Drug education should be strengthened in prisons and treatment centers. Prisoners easily learn ideas from peers in these settings.

Research

- The relationship between drug use and suicide merits further research, as this study has shown that a significant proportion of female drug users, especially those using ice, had thoughts about and attempts to commit suicide. The precise nature of this relationship requires study and could provide useful information for developing outreach and intervention strategies.
- One important finding from this study was the extent and nature of female drug users’ illegal income generating activities. From the survey and in-depth interview data, it was quite apparent that they rely on several types of illegal strategies to earn income for their drug use and lifestyle. Moreover, traditionally females have had a minor or non-existent role in selling, however, it was apparent from our data that some female users are also selling drugs and trafficking. Further investigation should focus on the relationship between drug use and illegal income generating activities.
- Another important finding from this study is that there are some psychotropic drug users who do not come to the attention of CRDA reporting agencies because they do not face or experience any immediate medical or enforcement consequences. From our survey data, 91% of 191 ecstasy users and 87% of ketamine users respectively have never been arrested. Approximately 60% and 72% of ecstasy and ketamine users respectively had not had contact with drug workers for counseling. Therefore, we recommend that studies targeting the “hidden” population are conducted on an ongoing basis to keep pace with the rapidly changing drug scene.

- As the findings of this study suggests, there is a complex relationship between users and their parents and families. On the one hand, some users have described family conflict and communication problems with their parents during their drug use initiation and continuation. Parents often, understandably, have limited understanding of how to cope with their child's drug use, and therefore may feel a sense of helplessness. On the other hand, users who have sought out help for their drug use problems have indicated that their parents are an important source of support in the recovery process. Further research on this complex relationship is needed and should include the development of skills based strategies for parents to assist their children in the drug recovery process.