

# **A Study on Factors Affecting the Drug Abuse Trend in Hong Kong**

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5. Despite repeated attempts to construct a statistical model to explain the fluctuations of drug abuse problem in Hong Kong, the research team cannot identify a single model that can satisfactorily capture the phenomenon. This may be due to two reasons. First, factors not readily available (e.g. cultural attitude towards drug abuse) cannot be studied using statistical modeling. Second, it is possible that drug abuse trends in Hong Kong are determined by a combination of factors, each of which have a small additive effect on the overall trend and they are all confounded together. If this is true, it will be difficult to model the drug abuse trends using regressive statistical techniques on the CRDA type of data.
6. It is important to note that statistical association does not equate causation. This research was designed to examine macroscopic association, rather than to provide explanations for the observed relationships. Hence, more studies are needed to understand the meanings behind our findings. In particular, it would be worthwhile to investigate the meanings of unemployment among individuals who are susceptible to drug abuse, and to ask what can be done to uncouple the association. Such understandings may help confirm causative relationship and may eventually lead to effective and evidence-based interventions.

## 1 Introduction

- 1.1 In early 1990s, Hong Kong was hit by a rising tide of drug abuse. Between 1991 and 1994, the incidence of drug abuse, as measured by the number of persons newly reported to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA), has increased by 100%. During the same period, the incidence of drug abuse among the less than 21-year-old increased by more than three folds. Amidst these upward trends, there was also a sharp increase of female drug abusers of all ages, and an increased popularity of psychotropic drugs among young drug users. This rising trend was taken seriously by the Hong Kong Government and multi-departmental Forward Action Plans were announced. The concerted anti-drug efforts appeared to be effective and most rising trends of drug abuse reversed in 1995 and 1996.
- 1.2 It was against such historical background that this research was commissioned. At that time, while there were several studies of the personal characteristics and individual risk factors of drug abuse in Hong Kong, there has been virtually no data on what governs the fluctuations of drug abuse trends within the local contexts. The former helps identification and possibly treatment of individuals drug abusers, but the latter is essential when it comes to population based prediction and intervention.
- 1.3 A comprehensive understanding of drug abuse trend within broader

socioeconomic and cultural perspectives would be invaluable for social and drug policy makers as well as health care planners for two key reasons. First, knowing what determines drug abuse trends would help forecast and perhaps even provide timely alert of likely surges. Second, such understandings may shed insight as to what can be done at a societal level in combating drug problems.

1.4 As such, it would be important to appreciate that this is not another study of the characteristics of drug abusers or risk factors of drug abuse. This study does not focus on drug abuse individuals or their immediate physical and interpersonal environment. Instead, this study aims to provide a different kind of data that would contribute to a more complete understanding of drug abuse trends in Hong Kong. The subjects of the investigation are hence the Hong Kong society, her drug abuse trends, and the larger social, economic and cultural environment.

1.5 In understanding what shapes drug abuse trends, a number of social theories are relevant. An in-depth discussion of such theories would be beyond the scope of this report, but a succinct summary is provided for quick reference (figure 1.1). As we will report in subsequent chapters, only some putative models can be tested.

1.6 This study relies solely on the CRDA (Central Registry of Drug Abuse) system for longitudinal drug abuse trends. The research team is fully aware of the merits, as well as the limitations, inherent to population based surveillance system; and has

considered the possibility of alternative drug abuse indicators. However, it did not take long for the research team to confirm that the CRDA statistics are the only longitudinal trend indicators available. Left with no alternative, the CRDA data were used but a small-scale validation was conducted to assess the degree of potential bias.

1.7 The study was conducted between April 1998 and June 2000. Apart from the investigators, two research assistants (Ms Joanne Chun and Ms Carrie Yam) assisted data collection and statistical analysis.