Project CHOICE II– Community-based Healthy Life Style Online and offline Interactive Comprehensive Educational Project (BDF200026)

Executive Summary

This exploratory study is based on the experiences of service users at Youth Crime Prevention Centre of the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, as well as the opinions of social workers and relevant stakeholders. The study was conducted using qualitative methods between March 2022 and February 2023, exploring the risk factors of cannabis abuse among youth and discussing strategies for preventing cannabis abuse through individual interviews and focus groups. The study sample included 30 youth service recipients, five case social workers, five dark-side informants, and 5 parents and 7 professionals participating in two focus groups. The study adopted the General Strain Theory and the Differential Association Theory as its theoretical foundation.

The results revealed that about one-third of youth cannabis abusers were not in a state of anger or frustration when they first encountered cannabis. The main reason for using cannabis was to gain recognition from friends or to try cannabis due to an inability to refuse friends' invitations. The results confirmed the argument proposed by the Differential Association Theory: deviant behaviour is learnt through interactions with others. Additionally, the results found that about two-thirds of youth cannabis abusers came from conflict-prone families and generally had low self-esteem and a lack of a sense of accomplishment. Since these youth were acquainted with friends who used cannabis, they tended to adopt self-reliant attitudes when experiencing negative emotions due to life stress and rarely sought help. They were influenced by their peers and mistakenly believed that cannabis could alleviate their emotions, leading to addictive behaviours such as cannabis use. This phenomenon confirms the General Strain Theory: when experiencing stress, individuals generate negative emotions like anger, frustration, and feeling of injustice, and when they cannot effectively cope with these emotions, deviant behaviour occurs, with cannabis abuse being a prime example.

In contrast, non-cannabis abused respondents generally came from harmonious and stable family backgrounds. Although they had friends who used cannabis, they could maintain a firm stance when faced with temptation and believed that cannabis was harmful. Furthermore, when first invited to use cannabis, these respondents were not in a state of life frustration and tended to experience less intense negative emotions or adopt inappropriate coping strategies when under stress.

Based on the opinions of various respondents, including youth, parents, social workers, and community members, the study proposes six directions for preventing cannabis use among youth: 1. Strengthen young people's awareness of the dangers of cannabis and correct misconceptions about cannabis; 2. Enhance support for youth facing life stress and emotional challenges; 3. Strengthen positive peer influence among youth and establish diversified social groups; 4. Strengthen family and societal support for youth; 5. Utilize big data analysis and artificial intelligence to enhance drug prevention education; and 6. Develop educational policies for preventing cannabis use at different stages of youth development.