

Chapter 3

LATEST DRUG SCENE AND DRUG TREND

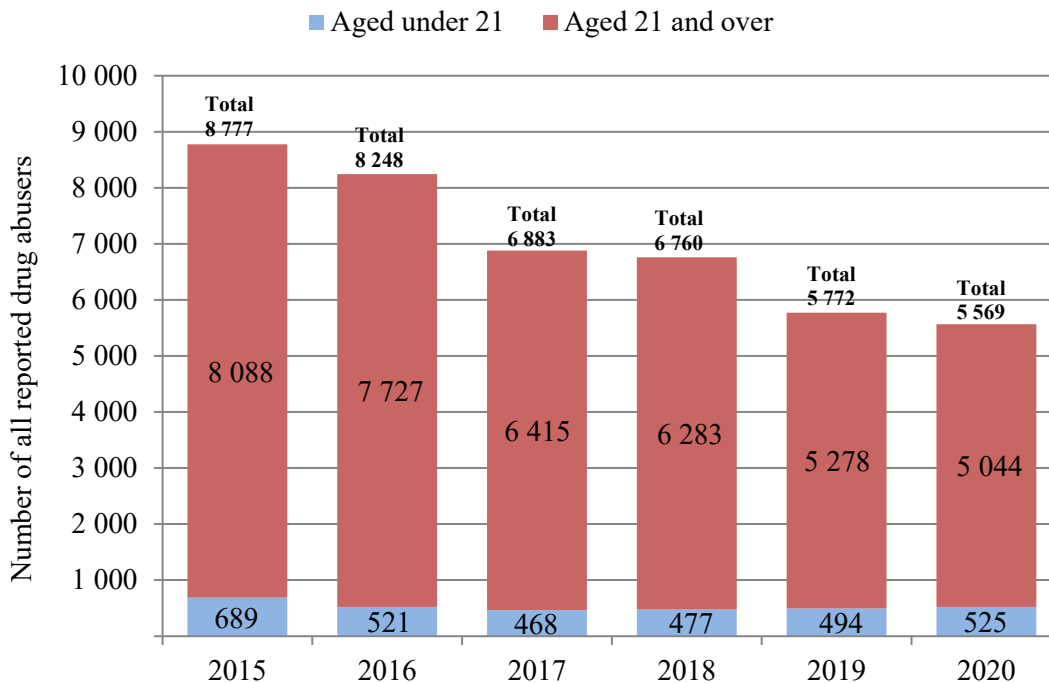
- 3.1 Chapter 3 sets out an overview of the drug scene and drug trend in Hong Kong in recent years based on the statistics of the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) as well as the views collated from the Working Group on the Three-year Plan for 2021 to 2023 and stakeholders during the consultation process of this Three-year Plan. The major findings, including the overall drug situation, the common types of drugs being abused and specific groups of drug abusers etc. are outlined in this chapter.
- 3.2 CRDA is a voluntary reporting system. It records information of drug abusers who have come into contact with and been reported by its reporting agencies, including law enforcement agencies, treatment and welfare units, tertiary institutions, hospitals and clinics. Compiled statistics of CRDA are reported to the Action Committee Against Narcotics and released to the public on a quarterly basis.
- 3.3 Although by nature CRDA does not measure the exact size of the drug-abusing population in Hong Kong at any particular time, statistics derived therefrom serve as indicators of the trends of drug abuse over time, allowing the anti-drug sector and interested parties to keep in view the latest local drug scene and drug trend as well as supporting an evidence-based approach to the formulation of anti-drug policy and measures.

(A) Overall Downward Trend, but Increase in Young Drug Abusers

- 3.4 The last Three-year Plan issued in March 2018 reported a continued downward trend of the total number of all reported drug abusers in Hong Kong from 2008 to 2017. According to the latest figures of CRDA, the declining trend continued from 2018 to 2020. The total number of all reported drug abusers declined by 18%, from 6 760 in 2018 to 5 569 in 2020. The number of newly reported drug abusers in 2020 also decreased by 18% (from 1 734 to 1 423) as compared to 2018.

- 3.5 The statistics for 2020 should however be viewed with caution as the figures might have been affected by the local COVID-19 pandemic since its outbreak in early 2020. Reporting agencies might have come into contact with fewer drug abusers due to the pandemic, and might have taken more time to submit data of drug abusers to CRDA.
- 3.6 Notwithstanding the overall declining trend of total reported drug abusers, the number as well as the proportion of reported drug abusers aged under 21 have picked up again since 2018, from 468 (6.8%) in 2017 to 477 (7.1%) in 2018 and 494 (8.6%) in 2019 and further to 525 (9.4%) in 2020, representing an increase of 12% in the number over the past three years. Among all the reported young drug abusers aged under 21 in 2020, 35% were students.

Figure 6: Number of all reported drug abusers



- 3.7 In addition, the findings of the triennial Survey of Drug Use among Students (Students Survey) in 2017/18, a research project conducted by a research institute commissioned by the Narcotics Division, indicated that the number of students who claimed to have taken drugs had increased by 23% (from 14 500 to 17 800) as compared to the number recorded in the 2014/15 Students Survey. The prevalence rate of drug-taking students in different education levels were 0.9% for upper primary, 2.6% for secondary and 3.9% for post-secondary. The corresponding rates recorded in the 2014/15

Students Survey were 0.8% for upper primary, 2.3% for secondary and 2.5% for post-secondary. Furthermore, over 80% of drug-taking students indicated that they had never sought help from others as they mostly did not consider themselves addicted to drugs.

- 3.8 A new round of triennial Students Survey for 2020/21 is underway to get hold of the latest drug situation among students. The results are expected to be available in 2022.

(B) Prevalence of “Ice” Abuse

- 3.9 The prevalence of reported abuse of “Ice” over ketamine has been recorded since 2015. Latest statistics of CRDA suggested that “Ice” continues to be the most common type of psychotropic substance abused. In 2020, there was still 36% of reported psychotropic substance abusers claiming to have taken “Ice” though the percentage showed a downward trend as compared to 39% in 2018.

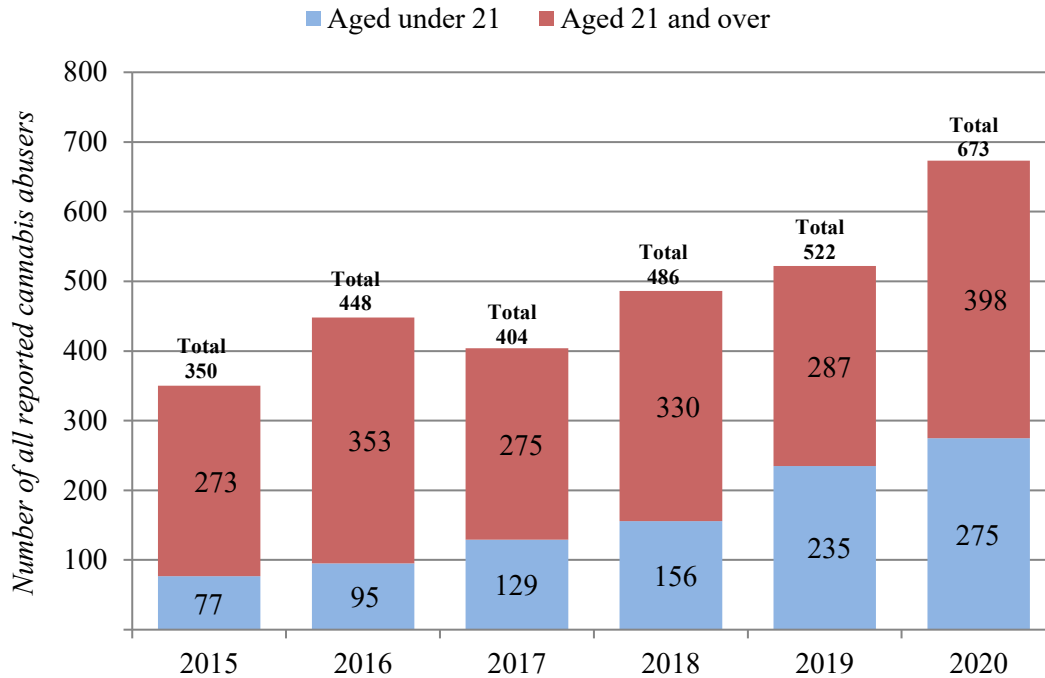
- 3.10 Anti-drug service providers have also reflected that most of the drug abusers admitted to or came across by various treatment and rehabilitation (T&R) service units were “Ice” abusers, and many of them suffer from drug-induced psychiatric problems, unstable mental health conditions and/or fluctuating emotions, which adversely affect their retention in treatment and motivation to quit drugs. The management of these drug-induced psychiatric issues poses great challenges to T&R service units, in particular drug treatment and rehabilitation centres.

(C) Prevalence of Cannabis Abuse

- 3.11 Since 2018, there has been an increase in the total number of cannabis abusers as recorded by CRDA. The total number of all reported drug abusers taking cannabis increased from 404 (5.9%) in 2017 to 486 (7.3%) in 2018 and 522 (9.2%) in 2019, and further to 673 (12.2%) in 2020. It is particularly worth noting that the percentage of all reported young drug abusers aged under 21 taking cannabis has substantially increased from 33.6% in 2018 to 49.1% in 2019 and 52.7% in 2020. These reported young cannabis abusers were mostly newly reported abusers. Cannabis is the most

commonly abused drug among reported drug abusers aged under 21 since 2019.

Figure 7: Number of all reported cannabis abusers

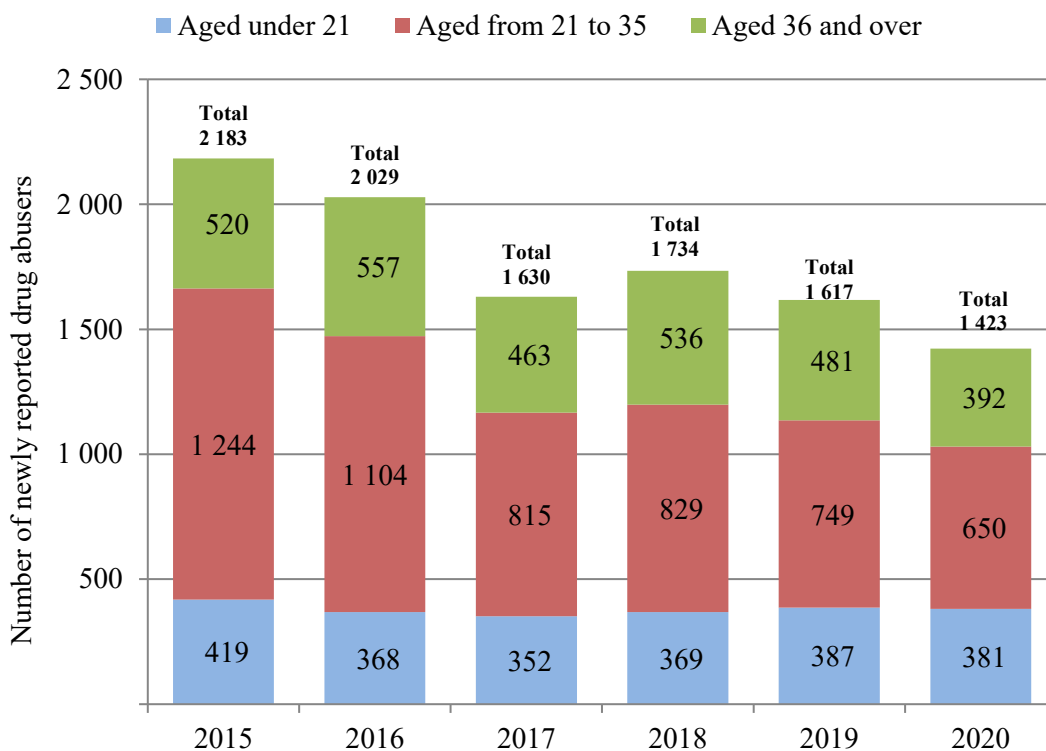


- 3.12 According to the 2017/18 Students Survey, cannabis was the most common type of drug taken by both secondary students and post-secondary students. The total number of students who claimed to have taken cannabis has increased from 8 600 (59.1%) in the 2014/15 Students Survey to 13 600 (76.5%) in the 2017/18 Students Survey.
- 3.13 Despite the prevalence of cannabis abuse, T&R service units have not reported a significant increase in the number of service users who abused cannabis. This discrepancy may be caused by the common misconception of cannabis abusers that cannabis is not harmful, and hence their reluctance to seek drug treatment. Given that many cannabis abusers may not experience immediate and severe health problems arising from their cannabis-taking habits, they also do not tend to seek medical assistance from Substance Abuse Clinics (SACs). It is therefore possible that cannabis abuser cases are not fully reflected in CRDA.

(D) Relatively High Proportion of Newly Reported Drug Abusers Being Young Adults

3.14 According to the figures of CRDA, among the newly reported drug abusers, the percentage of those aged under 21 were 21.3%, 23.9%, and 26.8% in 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively. While the proportion of this age group has increased gradually over the past three years, the proportion of newly reported drug abusers being young adults aged 21 to 35 remained to be relatively high, i.e. 47.8% in 2018, 46.3% in 2019 and 45.7% in 2020.

Figure 8: Number of newly reported drug abusers

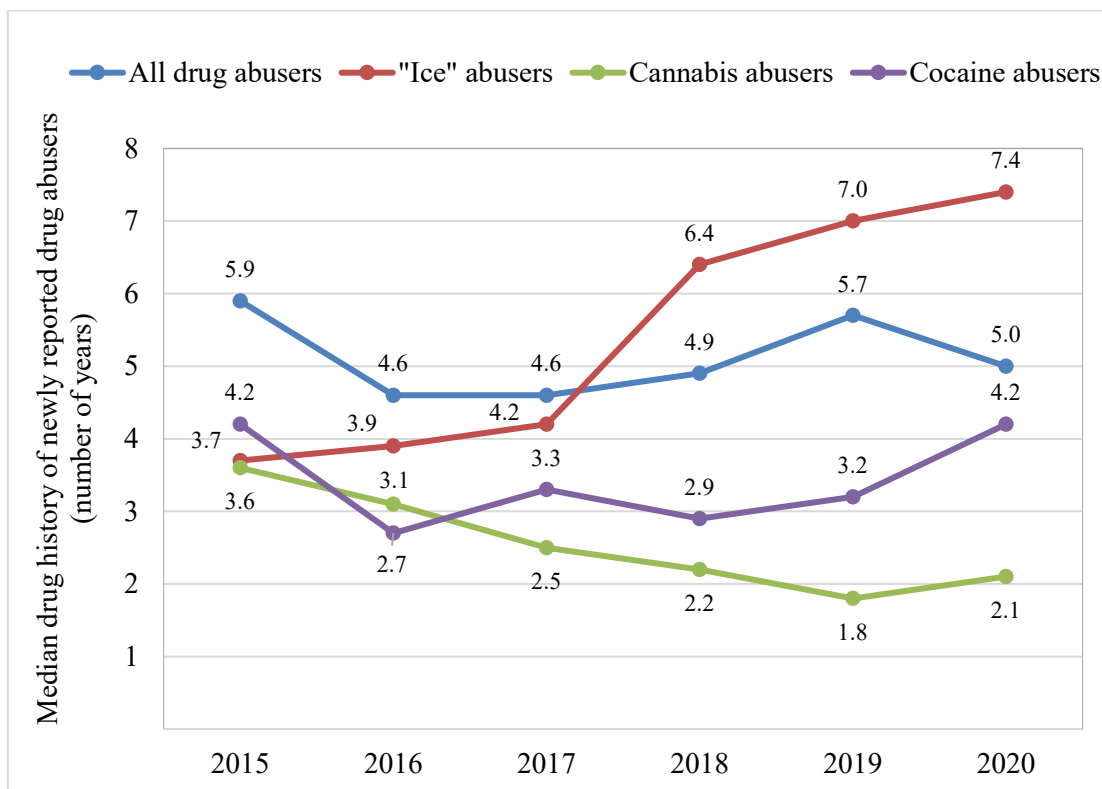


3.15 Stakeholders have reflected that young adult drug abusers include tertiary students, working adults, professionals and the non-engaged. According to CRDA, 34.3% of all reported drug abusers aged 21 to 35 were full-time workers, 16.4% were casual/part-time workers while 40.1% were unemployed in 2020. Many young adult drug abusers may encounter multi-faceted problems, making their cases more complicated.

(E) Persistent Problem of Hidden Drug Abuse

3.16 The latest CRDA figures revealed that the median history of drug abuse of newly reported abusers (i.e. the time for abusers to be reported to CRDA by reporting agencies from their first drug abuse) was 5.0 years in 2020, compared to 5.7 years in 2019. This indicates that the problem of hidden drug abuse still warrants attention.

Figure 9: Median drug history of newly reported drug abusers



3.17 Regarding the locality of drug abuse, the 2020 CRDA figures showed that 56.2% of all reported drug abusers took drugs at home or friend's home only, which has increased from 54.5% in 2019. This is in line with our observation on the worsening problem of hidden drug abuse.

3.18 Frontline social workers have expressed concerns that the local outbreak of COVID-19 since early 2020 may have further aggravated the problem as some people may resort to take drugs to relieve stress or depression while staying mostly at home. Seeking stress relief is one of the most common reasons for drug-taking.

(F) Specific Groups of Drug Abusers

3.19 Many T&R service units and stakeholders have agreed that the following specific groups of drug abusers should be given continued attention –

- ethnic minority drug abusers;
- pregnant drug abusers and drug-abusing parents; and
- men who have sex with men (MSM) with drug abuse problem.

Ethnic Minority Drug Abusers

3.20 The proportion of ethnic minority drug abusers has remained stable in recent years. It accounted for about 10% of the total number of reported drug abusers in Hong Kong from 2018 to 2020 as reflected by CRDA data. They were mainly Nepalis, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans while some were Vietnamese and Filipinos.

Pregnant Drug Abusers and Drug-abusing Parents

3.21 The proportion of females among the total number of all reported drug abusers was 19.6% in 2018, 20.3% in 2019 and 20.8% in 2020, indicating a slight upward trend. As revealed by the 2020 statistics of CRDA, among the total number of all reported male and female drug abusers, those who were married/cohabiting were 28.9% and 31.4% respectively. Some of them may have become parents and face difficulties in their family relationships or parental role and duties.

MSM with Drug Abuse Problem

3.22 Based on the “HARiS - HIV and AIDS Response Indicator Survey 2018 for Men who have Sex with Men” issued by the Department of Health (DH) in May 2019³, among all the 2,051 respondents who are MSM, 7.3% reported to have taken drugs before or during sex in the last six months. The most common drugs used is poppers⁴ (59.7%), drugs for erectile dysfunction

³ The factsheet of “HARiS - HIV and AIDS Response Indicator Survey 2018 for Men who have Sex with Men” issued by DH in May 2019 is available for download at https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/oth_rep2019_msm_e.pdf.

⁴ “Popper” is a slang term given broadly to drugs of the chemical class called alkyl nitrites that are inhaled.

(41.6%) and Ice (35.6%). In a similar survey for 2016⁵, 10.7% of the 1 989 respondents reported to have taken drugs respectively before or during sex in the last six months. The most common drugs used were the same as the survey in 2018.

- 3.23 Some T&R service units have also observed that drug abuse problem, in particular the participation in “Chem-sex” or “Chem-fun”, among MSM has persisted. At the same time, SACs have not noticed much change in the number of patients who are MSM.

(G) Observations

- 3.24 The general decline in the total number of all reported drug abusers in the past few years reflects the effectiveness of the anti-drug work of various sectors of society. However, we should pay heed to the complexity of drug abuse cases, and the noticeable rise of reported drug abuse cases involving young adults and young people aged under 21.

- 3.25 Attention should also be given to the challenges posed by the abuse of psychotropic substances such as ‘Ice’ and cannabis. T&R services need to be adjusted continuously and promptly to respond to the changing drug scene and drug trend, as well as the varying characteristics and needs of drug abusers.

⁵ The factsheet of “HARiS - HIV and AIDS Response Indicator Survey 2016 for Men who have Sex with Men” issued by DH in May 2017 is available for download at https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/oth_rep2017_msm_e.pdf.