

## Chapter 3

### DRUG SCENE AND DRUG TREND

- 3.1 The Government always stays vigilant in closely monitoring drug trends in and outside Hong Kong with a view to formulating suitable anti-drug and treatment and rehabilitation (T&R) policies. The main source of information is the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA). Other relevant sources providing reference on the local drug scene include the triennial surveys of drug use among students, drug-related enforcement statistics including those on arrests, prosecutions and convictions, relevant research studies, as well as admission statistics of T&R service units. In view of the impact of the global drug scene on Hong Kong, the Government also makes reference to published information from various international bodies such as the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs.
- 3.2 This chapter sets out an overview of the drug scene and drug trend in Hong Kong in recent years based on the statistics of CRDA as well as the views collated from the Working Group on the Three-year Plan for 2024 to 2026 and stakeholders during the consultation exercise 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. As it is the tenth Three-year Plan, we also took the opportunity to present some key statistics since the first Three-year Plan was promulgated in 1997 at **Annex D**.
- 3.3 CRDA is a voluntary reporting system recording the details of drug abusers who have come into contact with and have been reported by the reporting agencies, including law enforcement agencies, treatment and welfare agencies, tertiary institutions, hospitals and clinics. By its nature, while CRDA statistics do not measure the exact size of the drug abusing population in Hong Kong at any particular time, they are indicators of the trends of drug abuse over time. Compiled statistics of CRDA are reported to ACAN and released to the public on a quarterly basis.
- 3.4 The data and findings in this chapter provide useful and updated information on the drug situation in Hong Kong, and support an evidence-based approach to the formulation of anti-drug policies and measures.<sup>4</sup>

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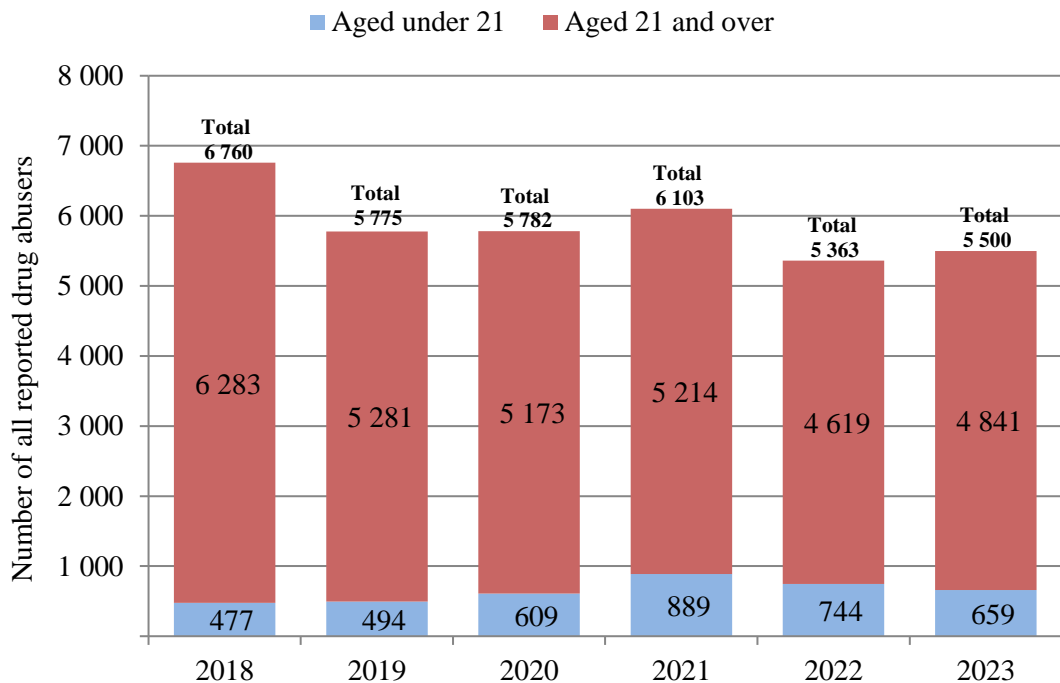
<sup>4</sup> The figures of CRDA in recent years and other relevant figures might be affected by the COVID-19

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

3.5 CRDA revealed a general downward trend in the total number of reported drug abusers which has started since 2009 despite a slight rebound in 2021. The total number of all reported drug abusers declined by 9.9%, from 6 103 in 2021 to 5 500 in 2023. The number of newly reported drug abusers in 2023 also decreased by 1.9% as compared to 2021 (from 2 037 to 1 998).

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 477 (7.1%) in 2018 to 609 (10.5%) in 2020, reached a recent peak at 889 (14.6%) in 2021 and declined to 744 (13.9%) in 2022 and 659 (12.0%) in 2023, representing a decrease of 25.9% in the number from 2021 to 2023. Among all the reported young drug abusers aged under 21 in 2023, 41% were students.

*Figure 6: Number of all reported drug abusers*



pandemic and its related social distancing measures imposed from early 2020 to early 2023 (such as travel restriction and closure of public venues), and individual behaviour in response to the pandemic. In interpreting and using the figures of CRDA in recent years, there is a need to take note of this situation.

- 3.7 In addition, the findings of the triennial Survey of Drug Use among Students (Students Survey) in 2020/21 indicated that the number of lifetime drug-taking students was estimated to be 17 300, which had decreased by 2.7% from the corresponding figure of 17 800 in the 2017/18 survey. The prevalence rate of lifetime drug-taking students in different education levels were 1.5% for upper primary, 2.5% for secondary and 3.3% for post-secondary. The corresponding rates recorded in the 2017/18 Students Survey were 0.9% for upper primary, 2.6% for secondary and 3.9% for post-secondary. Furthermore, over 85% 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 2023/24 is underway. The results are expected to be available in 2025.

**(B) Heroin remains the most commonly abused drug, but the proportion of psychotropic substances has continued to gain ground**

- 3.9 Figures from CRDA revealed that the most common type of drug abused in 2023 was heroin, followed by cocaine and methamphetamine (commonly known as “Ice” in Hong Kong and “meth” in some other parts of the world), while cocaine, cannabis and ketamine (commonly known as “K” in Hong Kong) were the three most common types of drugs abused among young abusers aged under 21.
- 3.10 While heroin, a type of narcotics analgesics (i.e. opioids), has remained the most common type of drug abused for decades, there has been a rising trend in the prevalence of psychotropic substances abuse (e.g. “Ice”, cocaine, cannabis, etc.). The proportion of psychotropic substance abusers rose from 60% in 2018 to 70% in 2021 and stayed at 69% and 68% in 2022 and 2023 respectively.

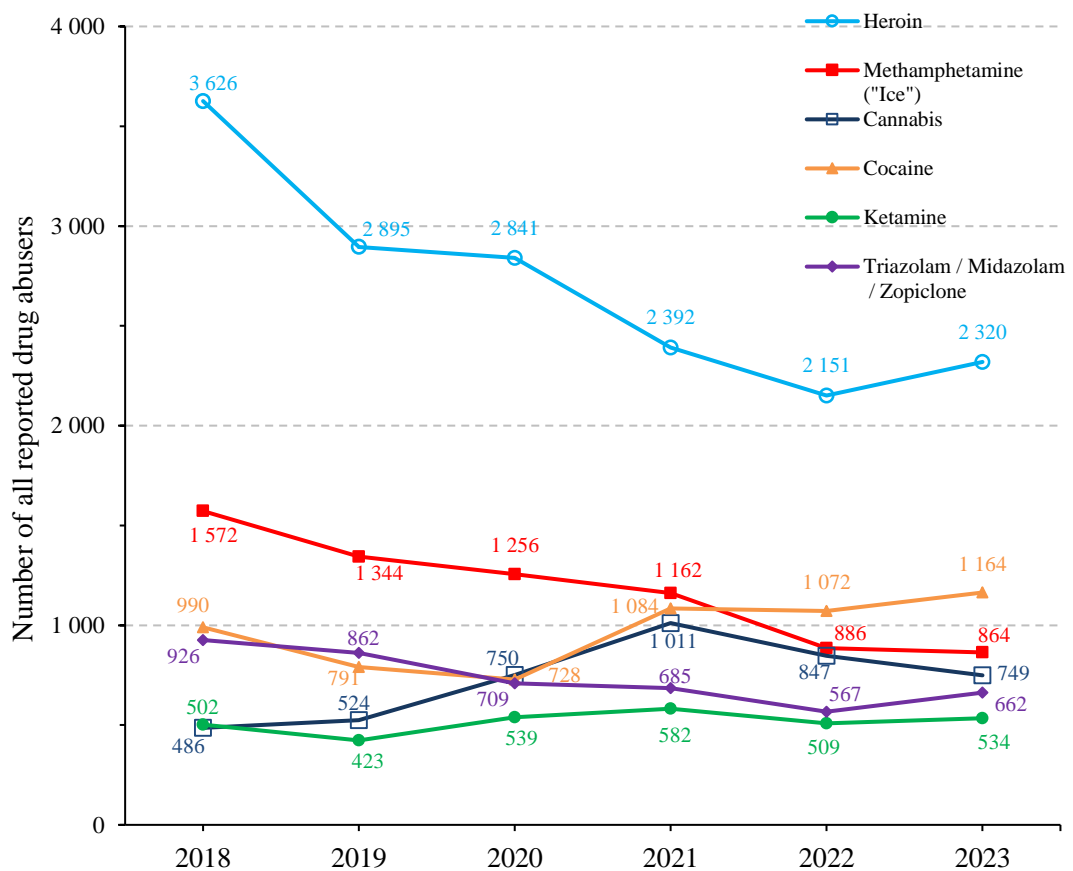
**(C) Cocaine has surpassed “Ice” as the most common type of psychotropic substance taken among the reported drug abusers in 2022, the first time over the past ten years**

- 3.11 Cocaine was the most common type of psychotropic substance taken among drug abusers in 2022 and 2023, overtaking “Ice” for the first time since 2013 and is still on the rise. Cocaine is also the most common type

of drugs abused among young abusers aged under 21 and those aged 21-35 in 2023. The number of reported cocaine abuse cases has increased 59.9% from 728 in 2020 to 1 164 in 2023.

3.12 According to a report published by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in March 2023, coca cultivation surged by 35% during the year between 2020 and 2021, and there is also an expansion of the cocaine market into non-traditional markets. The impact of the international supply of drugs on Hong Kong should be closely monitored.

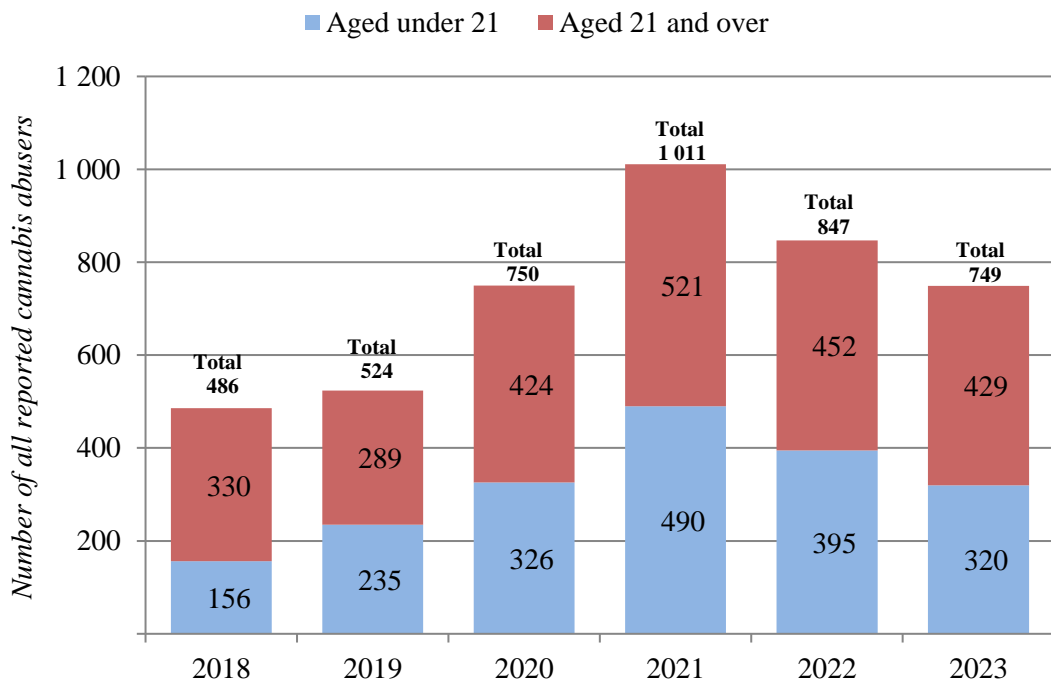
Figure 7: The most common types of drugs taken among drug abusers reported



**(D) Prevalence of cannabis remains a concern**

3.13 Among all reported drug abusers, the number of cannabis abusers increased significantly from 486 (7.3%) in 2018 to 1 011 (17.0%) in 2021, despite a minor decrease to 847 (16.3%) in 2022 and 749 (13.9%) in 2023. Among reported drug abusers aged under 21, almost half of them abused cannabis (49.4% in 2023) and it has been their most common type of drug abused from 2019 to 2022.

Figure 8: Number of all reported cannabis abusers



- 3.14 According to the 2020/21 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 slightly decreased from 13 600 (76.5%) in the 2017/18 Students Survey to 12 100 (69.9%) in the 2020/21 Students Survey.
- 3.15 T&R service units have observed in recent years a significant increase in the number of service users who abused cannabis, especially among young drug abusers, which is in line with the statistics reflected by CRDA. On the other hand, given that many cannabis abusers may not be aware of any immediate and severe health problems arising from their cannabis usage, they do not tend to seek medical assistance from Substance Abuse Clinics (SACs) or other medical service units. It is therefore possible that cannabis abuser cases are not fully reflected in CRDA.

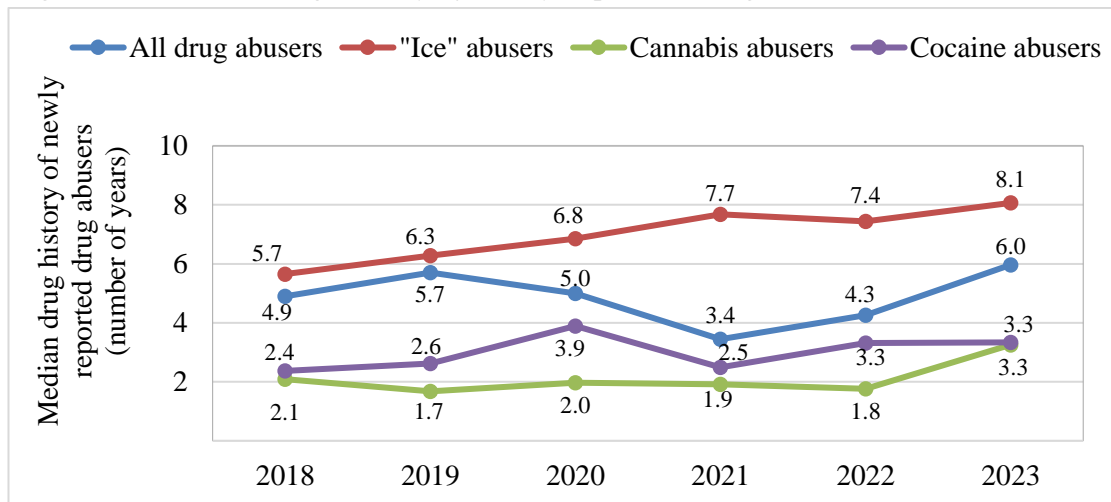
**(E) Challenges posed by changes in anti-drug policies in overseas jurisdictions**

- 3.16 Cannabis (including cannabidiol (CBD)) have been becoming popular in recent years, especially among young people around the world. Some merchants falsely claim that smoking cannabis can bring health benefits. The decriminalisation and even legalisation of recreational use of cannabis in some overseas jurisdictions in recent years has indirectly reinforced the perception that cannabis is not harmful among some people and poses a challenge to anti-drug work in Hong Kong. Local young people, in particular, may attempt to try cannabis when they travel.
- 3.17 In fact, cannabis and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) are strictly under international control and remain illegal as dangerous drugs in Hong Kong. To safeguard public health and combat drug problems in Hong Kong, CBD has been added to the First Schedule to the Dangerous Drugs Ordinance (DDO) (Cap. 134) in 2022, and the control of CBD as a dangerous drug under DDO has come into effect on 1 February 2023.

**(F) “Hidden” drug abuse continues to warrant attention**

- 3.18 The median drug history of newly reported abusers dropped from 5.7 years in 2019 to 3.4 years in 2021 but rebounded to 4.3 years in 2022 and as long as 6.0 years in 2023. “Home/friend’s home only” continued to be the most common locality for drug taking (ranged from 54% to 62% during 2019-2023). Both sets of statistics revealed the need for continued attention to the issue of hidden drug abuse.
- 3.19 According to the observations of frontline social workers and the figures of CRDA, there was no obvious worsening of hidden drug abuse during the local outbreak of COVID-19 since early 2020. That said, the longer median drug history of newly reported abusers in 2023 has reflected that the drug situation and drug scene might be affected by the resumption of normalcy in society from COVID-19. It is necessary to continue to pay close attention to the latest statistical figures, and make reference to other sources of statistics and information for an ongoing monitoring of the drug trends.

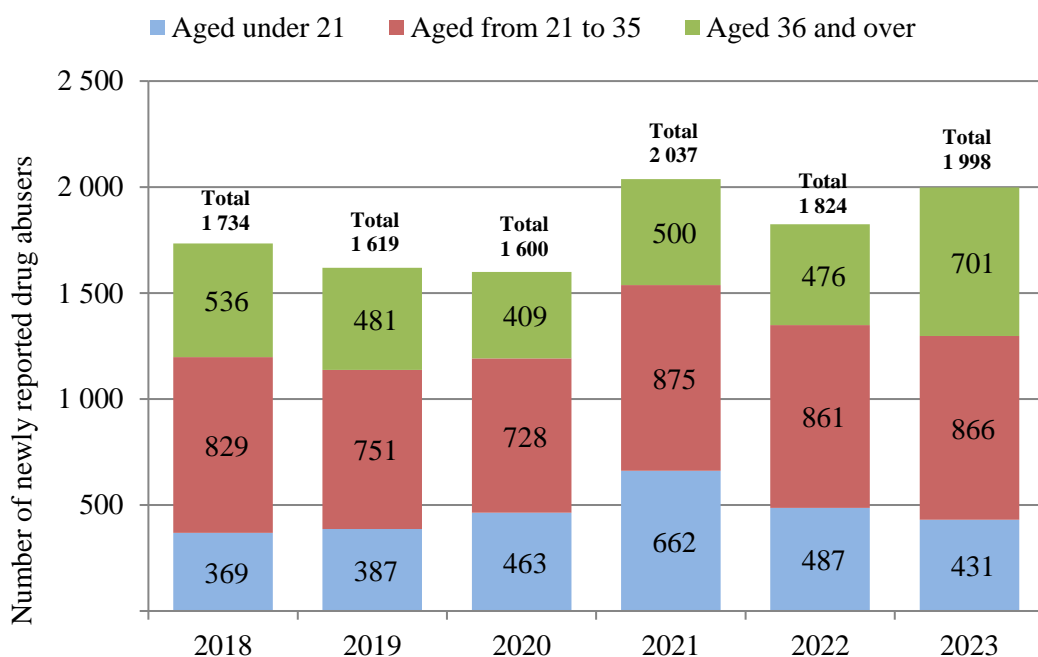
Figure 9: Median drug history of newly reported drug abusers



**(G) The proportion of young adult drug abusers aged 21 – 35 and the proportion of young abusers aged under 21 remains high**

3.20 According to the figures of CRDA, among the newly reported drug abusers, the percentage of those aged under 21 were 32.5%, 26.7%, and 21.6% in 2021, 2022 and 2023 respectively, compared to 21.3% in 2018. In the meantime, the proportion of newly reported drug abusers being young adults aged 21 to 35 remained to be relatively high, i.e. 43.0% in 2021, 47.2% in 2022 and 43.3% in 2023.

Figure 10: Number of newly reported drug abusers



3.21 Stakeholders have reflected that young adult drug abusers include tertiary students, working adults, professionals and the non-engaged. According to CRDA, 35.0% of all reported drug abusers aged 21 to 35 were full-time workers, 18.8% were casual/part-time workers while 30.9% were unemployed in 2023. Many young adult drug abusers may encounter multi-faceted problems, making their cases more complicated.