

Chapter 3

DRUG SCENE AND DRUG TREND

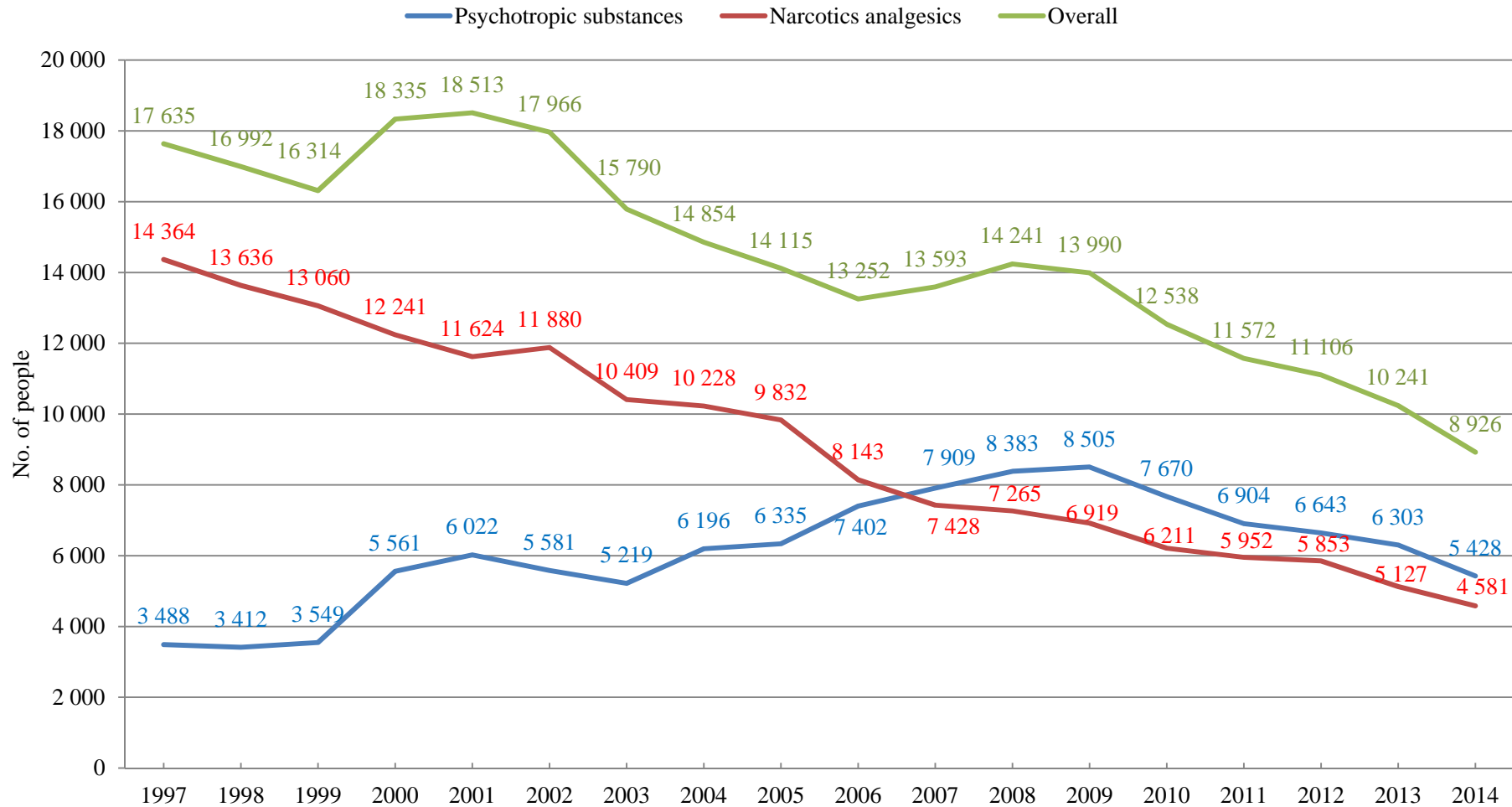
3.1 In Chapter 2, we have provided an overview on the T&R services in Hong Kong and summarised the noteworthy achievements that we have made in the last few years to enhance our services. Before proceeding with the discussion of the strategic direction in the coming three years (2015 –2017), we will set out in this Chapter some major observations on the local drug scene and drug trends in recent years. The situation revealed in the following paragraphs sheds some light on the suitable priorities of work to cater for the needs of drug abusers and tackle the drug abuse problems in Hong Kong.

(A) Overall Downward Trend but Persistency of Hidden Drug Abuse

3.2 The concerted efforts by the Government and different sectors of the community over the past few years have brought about a substantial decline in the number of reported drug abusers, in particular young drug abusers. This testifies to the effectiveness of the anti-drug initiatives set out in Chapter 2. According to the 2014 statistics published by the CRDA, the total number of reported drug abusers has declined by 2% to 13% each year after 2008. Between 2008 and 2014, this number had reduced by 37% in total, from 14 241 to 8 926. Among these, the number of reported drug abusers aged under 21 had declined substantially by 72% from 2 811 in 2010 to 800 in 2014.

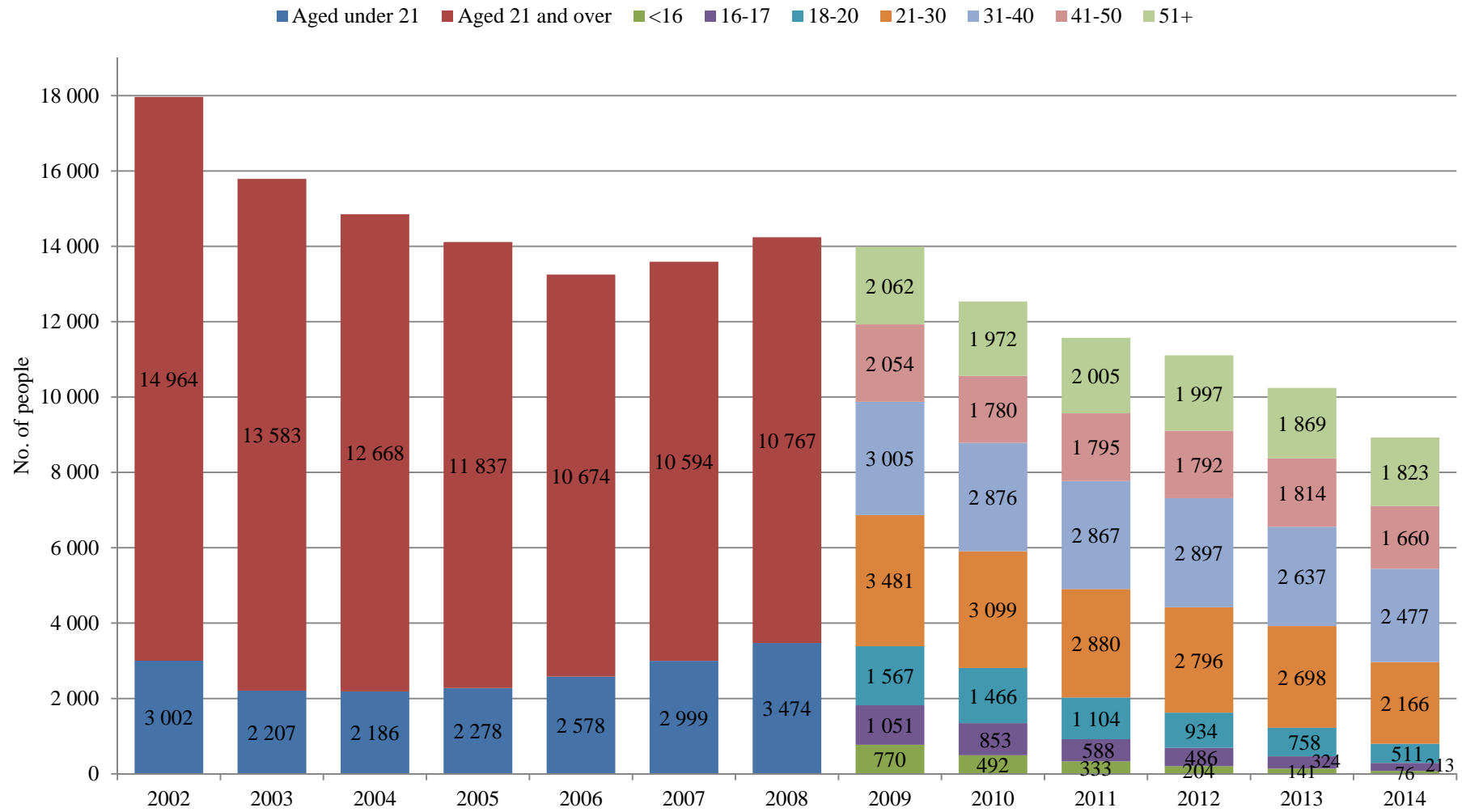
3.3 Moreover, a general decline was observed in most of the substances abused except methamphetamine (“Ice”) (more in paragraph 3.10 below) and cannabis. Since the reported number of PSAs peaked at 8 505 in 2009, it was reduced by 36% to 5 428 in 2014. Similarly, heroin, the most common type of drug abused, had seen its reported abusers decrease by 34% from 6 903 in 2009 to 4 579 in 2014.

Graph 10: Reported drug abusers by drug type, 1997 – 2014



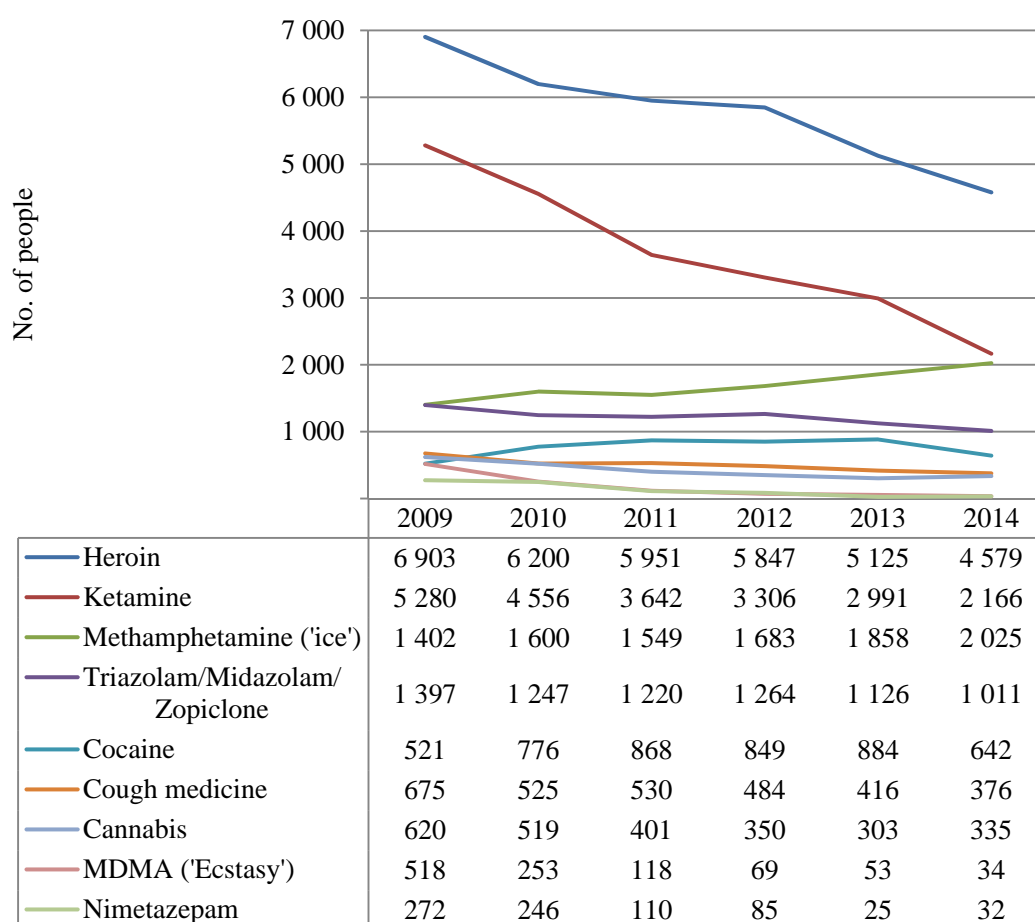
Notes : Some abusers may not report the type of drug abused.
 An individual abuser may take both narcotics analgesics and psychotropic substances during a given year.

Graph 11: Reported drug abusers by age, 2002 – 2014



3.4 The statistics on persons arrested for drug-related crimes are more or less in line with the declining drug trend. While the figures remained at a level of around 5 600 to 6 000 persons per year from 2011 to 2013, the corresponding figure dropped substantially in 2014 (around 4 900 persons arrested). ND will continue to track these enforcement figures to facilitate our monitoring and analysis of the overall drug scene in Hong Kong.

Graph 12: Common types of drugs abused, 2009 – 2014

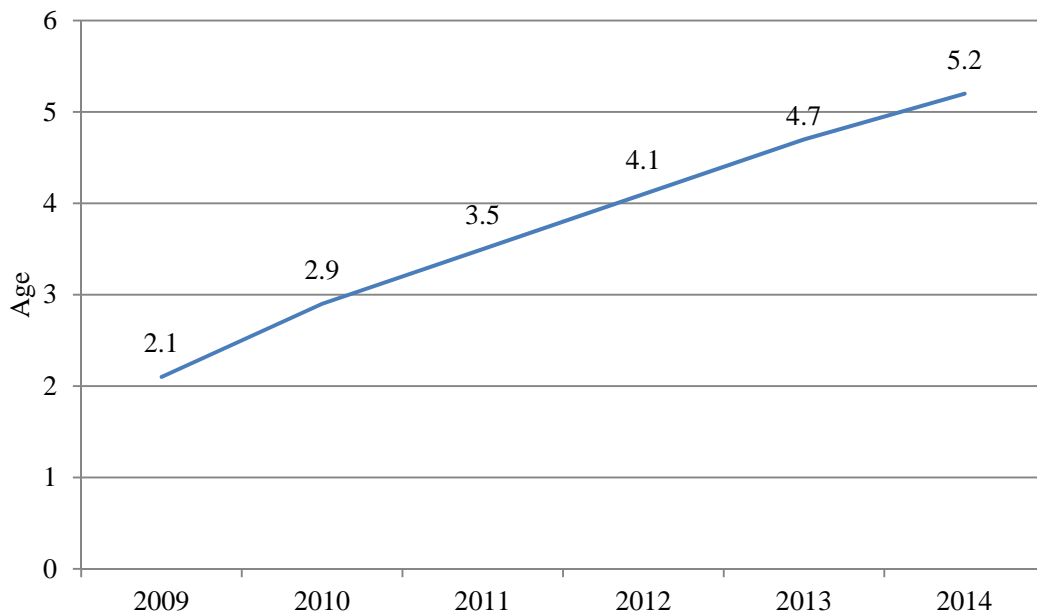


Note: An abuser may take multiple drugs in a given year.

3.5 Despite the overall downward drug trend, hidden drug abuse remains a concern, given the continual rise in the drug history of newly reported cases. Half of the newly reported abusers in 2014 had abused drugs for at least 5.2 years, compared with 4.7 years in 2013 and 4.1 years in 2012. It has also more than doubled in a span of five years, as compared with 2.1 years in 2009.

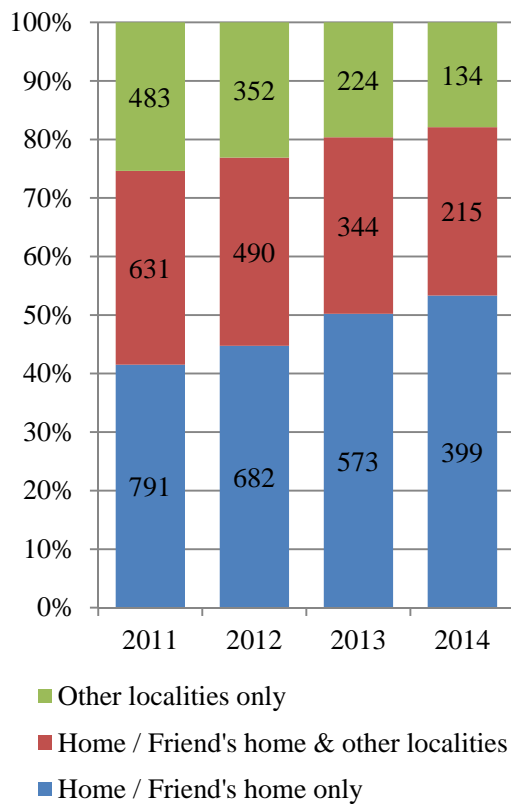
3.6 Many factors pose challenges to the early identification of drug abusers. Unlike traditional drug abuse, psychotropic substances abuse does not lead to apparent withdrawal symptoms. Many PSAs perceive drug taking as a matter of personal choice and usually have low motivation to seek help, until prolonged drug abuse has caused serious damages to their health or caused tension in various aspects of life. Furthermore, the proportion of reported drug abusers who took drugs at home or at friend's home remained high at around 80% since 2010. Among those aged under 21, the most popular localities for taking drugs are also home/friend's home (82% in 2014). All these factors have made the identification of drug abusers much more difficult.

Graph 13: Median Drug Age of Newly Reported Drug Abusers, 2009 – 2014

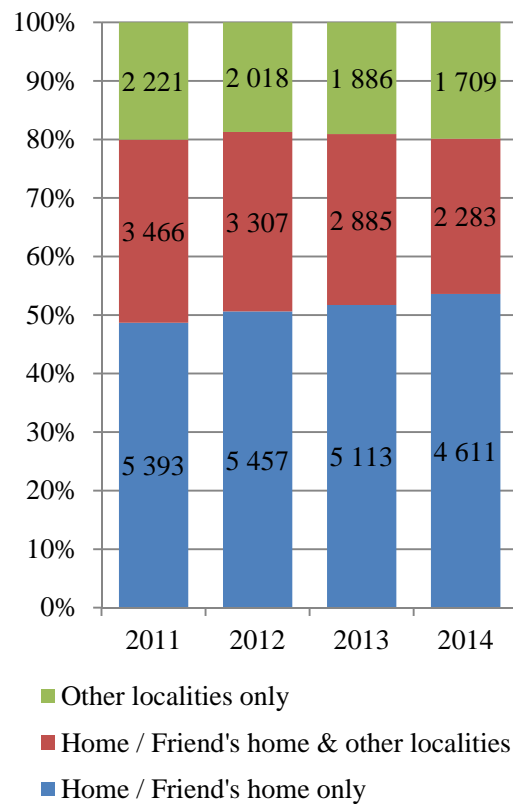


Graph 14: Broad Locality of Abusing Drugs, 2011 – 2014

(A) Aged under 21



(B) All reported drug abusers



(B) Harmful Effects of Psychotropic Substances

3.7 Moreover, since 2007, psychotropic substances, such as ketamine, cocaine and “Ice” have become more prevalent than the traditional drugs (mainly heroin). In the past eight years, the proportion of PSAs among drug abusers was around 60%. The number of reported narcotics analgesics abusers (4 581) in 2014 continued to be lower than the number of PSAs (5 428). Similar to 2013, there were around six newly reported PSAs (1 696) for every newly reported narcotics analgesics abuser (300). According to the data in 2014, the most commonly abused psychotropic substances included ketamine (25%), “Ice” (23%), triazolam/midazolam/zopiclone (11%), cocaine (7%), cough medicine (4%) and cannabis (4%).

3.8 Various research studies and clinical cases in recent years have examined and validated the harmful effects of psychotropic substances on the health of their abusers. Prolonged abuse of psychotropic substances can lead to

severe cognitive impairment, depression and hallucinations, and even induce dementia-like symptoms. It can also lead to various long-term, and possibly irreversible, damages to bodily functions such as the brain, urinary tracts and the liver. From January 2010 to December 2014, about 4 310 new patients with drug abuse problems attended SACs in HA. Over 60% of these patients suffered from psychiatric disorders. The common mental disorders such as drug-induced psychotic disorders (around 22%), affective disorders (around 12%), and schizophrenic spectrum disorders (around 7%).

- 3.9 When drug abusers are identified by the help network, they usually have already suffered from varying degrees of psychiatric problems, on top of other physical health issues. Each case has become more complex today, warranting multi-disciplinary interventions.
- 3.10 Another noteworthy development in recent years is the increasing popularity of “Ice” among PSAs. The proportion of drug abusers who abuse “Ice” had gradually climbed from 15.2% in 2012 to 18.3% in 2013, and further to 23% in 2014. The number of reported “Ice” abusers also steadily increased from 1 683 in 2012 to 1 858 in 2013, and further to 2 025 in 2014. If this trend continues, “Ice” would soon replace ketamine as the most prevalent psychotropic substance in Hong Kong. Many service units advise that their “Ice” abuse cases have already outnumbered ketamine cases. As regards enforcement figures, while the quantity of “Ice” seizure remained quite steady between 2007 and 2013, a notable increase was observed in 2014, even surpassing ketamine to be the number one psychotropic substance seized in Hong Kong. This probably points to an increase in the supply of “Ice” in Hong Kong in 2014.
- 3.11 Worse still, “Ice” abuse can cause agitation, anxiety, depression, tension, hallucination and feeling of persecution, which may lead to violent or self-destructive behaviour. Feedback from many frontline social workers and medical professionals suggests the increasing difficulties in handling cases with drug-induced psychiatric symptoms as a result of growing prevalence of psychotropic substance abuse and the increasing popularity of “Ice”. The handling of “Ice” abuse cases will probably be one of the greatest challenges for the anti-drug sector in the coming years.

(C) Demographic Changes in the Drug-abusing Population

- 3.12 In recent years, we also observe an increasing proportion of newly reported drug abusers who are identified in their young adulthood (aged 21-35). This proportion had steadily increased from 47% in 2011 to 55% in 2014, whereas the proportion of newly reported drug abusers aged under 21 had declined from 38% to 24% over the same period. Among the newly reported drug abusers, around 40% are full-time workers, 14% are casual/part-time workers, and 35% are unemployed, while only 5% are students. As regards their marital status, the proportion of drug abusers who are married/cohabiting had also increased steadily to 26% in 2014 from 19% in 2011, while the proportion of drug abusers who are divorced/separated is 8%, steadily increased from 5% in 2011.
- 3.13 These young adults, once fallen prey to drugs, would have to face many problems in various aspects of life including work, relationship with spouse, children and parents, and living expenses, etc. They would need assistance at multi-dimensional and multi-disciplinary levels. Moreover, it is sometimes observed that parents who are drug abusers or ex-drug abusers often face problems such as unhealthy coping styles in dealing with problems of their children or poor parent-child relationship.

(D) Relapse and Reintegration into Society

- 3.14 Another challenge constantly faced by service providers in the anti-drug field is the relapse of drug abusers after treatment process. Although there is no comprehensive statistics showing the relapse rate of drug abusers in Hong Kong, many service providers and ex-drug abusers agree that it is usually a lengthy process for drug abusers to achieve complete abstinence from drugs. According to a study³, self-efficacy, satisfaction with life, an active job attitude and association with as well as support from drug-free friends are important elements which determine the treatment results of chronic drug abusers. This finding more or less aligns with the statistics in CRDA, which indicates that the most common reasons for all reported drug abusers were to relieve boredom/depression/stress (46%), to identify with peers (45%), and to avoid the discomfort of its absence (40%).

³ A Longitudinal Study of Chronic Drug Abusers in Hong Kong; Cheung Yeut-wah

(E) Role of Family Members in Drug Abuse Intervention

3.15 There is general consensus that family members play an increasingly important role in the identification of drug abusers and intervention. According to a survey conducted by a service agency⁴, around 50% of drug abusers have been identified by their family members/friends within half a year after they started taking drugs, and around 45% of drug abusers were first identified by their family members. Frontline workers also observe that drug abusers who have supportive families are more likely to successfully quit drugs and turn a new leaf. Family members are now getting more and more involved in the T&R process of drug abusers. Increasingly, service agencies are building this element of family involvement in their T&R services.

(F) Conclusion

3.16 The continuous decrease in the number of reported drug abusers in the past few years is a reflection of the effectiveness of the anti-drug strategies and measures adopted since the release of the Report of Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse. However, there is no ground for complacency since the prevalence of psychotropic drugs with their consequential health damage on the drug abusers, and the prolonged drug history of first-time reports remain causes of major concern, and have poses more challenges to T&R services. Secondly, the increase in specific groups, such as young adult working drug abusers call for more focus in the mode of intervention. The anti-drug field will also have to continue with our work to tackle the hidden drug abuse problem and minimise relapse of drug abusers who have completed treatment programmes. We need to consider our work priority in the coming three years, foster closer collaboration between service units, and further deepen services in order to meet the new challenges posed by the latest drug scene and drug trends.

⁴ A survey conducted by the Hong Kong Christian Service in November and December 2013 on around 100 drug abusers/ex-drug abusers/youth at risk.