

Status of Demand for ILlicit Drugs in Thailand

Vichai Poshyachinda, Usaneya Perngparn and Vipa Danthamrongkul

Drug Dependence Research Center, Institute of Health Research, Chulalongkorn University

ABSTRACT

Current news and information commonly known to the public has focussed on the illicit stimulant (YaBa) epidemic. However, substantial information from recorded data and research studies indicated that a critical trend of rapid change occurred in many types of illicit substances concurrently.

The appearance of the first heroin epidemic in 1959 changed the century old opium smoking scene to a new era dominated by heroin dependence although abuse of other illicit substances including YaBa concurrently spread widely in the country. During the first half of the last decade, the abuse of YaBa increased rapidly. The number of YaBa indictment and treatment cases has superceded those for heroin in the last few years. This dramatic change of the substance abuse scene created a sense of alarm nationwide. This new wave of public awareness culminated in the declaration of substance abuse as the national priority problem by the present Government.

There is a substantial amount of information and data on substance abuse in the records of agencies concerned with substance abuse and in research studies. A selection of those which reflect patterns that require special consideration for future interventions are presented here in relation to 5 target groups. 1) the drug offender, 2) drug dependents in treatment, 3) household and student populations, 4) a case study of a tourist area and 5) specific populations namely men who have sex with men, labourers on deep sea fishing boats, long haul truck drivers and commercial sex workers.

Information and statistics indicate that ganja (marihuana, or cannabis sativa) smoking prevailed over the whole country at 12% prevalence of having ever used for the population aged between 12-65 years old. The prevalence of ganja use within 1 year dropped to 1.5% Compared to other regions, the northeastern region has the highest prevalence of having ever used ganja, at 40% Kratom leaf chewing (a local shrub, *mitragyna speciosa*, grows widely over the whole country) is another long standing traditional practice and is also still common countrywide. However, the peripheral provinces of Bangkok and the Southern region are the foci of the highest ever having used prevalence. In these two regions the prevalence of use in 1 year is actually higher than ganja. A survey of a nationally representative student population demonstrated ever having used prevalence of ganja at 2.6% The student population in Bangkok had the highest prevalence of ever having used ganja at 4.2%.

Available data indicated that the current YaBa epidemic started about 10 years ago. The student and waged labour population suffered the highest prevalence especially in Bangkok and the peripheral provinces of Bangkok.

The severity decreased consecutively from the Central region to the Northeastern and Southern regions. At present, the YaBa epidemic in Bangkok and its periphery seems to have decreased. The situation in the Central and Northern regions remains stationary. The Southern region had the steepest rise of yearly prevalence. The trend of change among the waged labour population was most remarkable with a continuous rise through the last 5 years in all regions in particular for the age group below age 25.

Statistics of heroin use among drug offenders and treatment population decreased in direct proportion to the increase in the use of YaBa. However, during the last 2-3 years the trend has leveled off.

The new trend that deserves attentions is the gradual spread of ecstasy and ketamine use. Available statistics indicate a rapid countrywide spread. The evidence suggests recreational use as the main driving force. Occasional use is the most common practice. However, practically all types of illicit drugs at present including ganja, heroin and YaBa are being used for recreational purposes.

The case study of a tourist area, Samui Island in the Southern region Surat Thani province, demonstrated the penetration of illicit drug use into practically all communities. The common types of illicit substance use can be ranked from, ganja, to YaBa, then heroin and most recently ecstasy and ketamine. Overdose deaths from heroin use also appeared among the tourist population at an almost monthly rate in addition to accidental drowning. Retail selling of illicit drugs became widespread according to the local respondents. The local respondents had observed the spread of illicit substance use and retail selling from the tourists to their own community and the increased participation of the local population in the tourist entertainment industry yet their opinion of the impact of tourist development remained "good". However, opinion from the secondary school completely contradicted the community.

Overall, the status of illicit drug demand in the country showed countrywide abuse of many types of substances with marked differences from one area to another. The strong conducive factors can be broadly grouped under functional and recreational use. The pattern of use also differed most markedly between populations of different age groups and professions. The situation calls for well targeted and specific interventions in the near future if not now.

Key words:

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