

Drug abuse and drug situation in Hong Kong in first quarter of 2024

The Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN) noted at its meeting today (May 24) the figures of the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) and other drug-related figures for the first quarter of 2024. The ACAN noticed that the total number of reported drug abusers in the first quarter of 2024 was lower than that of 2023. However, the figures tend to show greater volatilities in the first quarter of a year. The ACAN will closely monitor the situation in the remaining quarters of 2024, and will at the same time continue to carry out its anti-drug work.

Figures from the CRDA revealed that the total number of reported drug abusers in the first quarter of 2024 was 1 666 while that of the same period in 2023 was 1 863. The number of reported young drug abusers aged under 21 in the first quarter of 2024 was 259. The most common type of drugs abused in the first quarter of 2024 was heroin, followed by cocaine and cannabis. Whereas among young drug abusers aged under 21, the three most common types of drugs abused were cannabis, cocaine and ketamine (commonly known as "K").

According to the figures from law enforcement agencies, the number of persons arrested for drug offences in the first quarter of 2024 was 767, with 62 of them being young drug abusers aged under 21. According to the court cases concluded for the same period, the conviction rate of persons being prosecuted for drug offences was as high as close to 90 per cent. As for young offenders aged under 21 who were sentenced to imprisonment for drug trafficking, more than half of them were sentenced to over five years in prison, and the longest period of imprisonment was nearly 22 years.

The ACAN expressed grave concern about the situation of cannabis abuse. In particular, cannabis was the most common type of drugs abused by reported young drug abusers aged under 21 in the first quarter of 2024, with over half (51 per cent) of them taking this drug. The ACAN Chairman, Dr Donald Li, said, "Some youngsters consider taking cannabis trendy or a so-called 'chill' lifestyle, and even think that the legalisation of cannabis is a world trend. Such thinking has ignored the medical evidence that smoking cannabis is harmful to health. Cannabis is addictive. Staying away from cannabis is the true 'chill' lifestyle." To raise public awareness of the harms of cannabis, especially awareness among young people, the Narcotics Division (ND) of the Security Bureau (SB) will launch a new TV Announcement in the Public Interest (API) and the corresponding radio API to disseminate the message that "Cannabis is a drug" in 2024. The website of the ND (www.nd.gov.hk/en/index.html) contains correct information and frequently asked questions about cannabis.

The ACAN continues to express concern about the abuse of cocaine, and supports the Government to keep up its targeted measures. The ND launched a TV and the corresponding radio API in early 2024, describing cocaine abuse as

sinking deep into a quagmire. Moreover, the ND has produced an animated video, which is about how a young person had been controlled by his "inner demons" and paid a heavy price for one wrong decision: trying cocaine. Both videos have been uploaded onto the ND's website (www.nd.gov.hk/en/cocaine_info.html) and its social media accounts (the ND's YouTube channel, Facebook page and Instagram account of "narcotics.divisionhk")

Apart from cannabis and cocaine, the ACAN noticed the number of drug trafficking cases involving inbound travellers has increased recently. Dr Li said, "The law enforcement agencies have detected numerous drug trafficking cases involving baggage concealment by air passengers recently. As the summer holiday is approaching, the ACAN will fully support the Government to take law enforcement actions against drug trafficking activities before and during the summer holiday. Cannabidiol, which is known as CBD, has been listed as a dangerous drug. Members of the public should pay careful attention to product labels when travelling during the summer holiday, and should not risk to try cannabis and CBD products, or bring them back to Hong Kong, to avoid breaching the law." The ND also mentioned that since travelling has resumed normal, drug dealers often post recruitment advertisements on dubious websites and social media accounts with offers of free trips and high remuneration to lure members of the public into drug trafficking. The ND will step up publicity and education to remind the public to stay vigilant and not to fall into drug traps driven by greed. Drug trafficking is a serious offence, and offenders upon conviction are liable to a maximum penalty of life imprisonment and a fine of \$5 million in Hong Kong, or may even be sentenced to death in other places.

As regards the challenges posed by emerging new drugs, the Government will continue to stay vigilant in closely monitoring drug trends in and outside Hong Kong, and will take appropriate follow-up actions to safeguard public health. As the summer holiday is approaching, members of the public may be attracted by the novelty of products that contain drugs when travelling to other places. The ND would like to remind the public to say no to drugs at all times, and should never try drugs out of curiosity, even if they are offered for free. When coming across oil and relevant products for heat-not-burn cigarettes or electronic cigarettes, members of the public are urged to pay careful attention if these products contain cannabis, CBD, emerging new drugs, and other harmful substances or poison, and should not try them or bring them back to Hong Kong. The public should not smoke any products.

Members of the public can send messages to professional social workers at 98 186 186 through instant messaging applications WhatsApp and WeChat when they have any doubts about drugs or when they want to seek help. They can also call the 24-hour hotline 186 186. This service is provided by a non-governmental organisation commissioned by the ND.

The figures of the CRDA for the first quarter of 2024 are also available on the website of the ND (www.nd.gov.hk/en/crda_main_charts_and_tables.html).