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## Cocaine use rising in Hong Kong ... and it's not just expat bankers who are at risk of addiction

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*Drugs charities warn the stigma of abuse could be preventing young local Chinese from seeking help*

Cocaine abuse is on the rise in Hong Kong – and the local Chinese population is just as at risk of becoming addicted as expats, charities say.

Charity chiefs and drug addict counsellors have again claimed figures from the government's Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) significantly underestimate both the scale and rising levels of cocaine addiction in the city.

In the first half of 2016, the latest CRDA figures suggested the total number of reported drug abusers decreased by 7 per cent (from 5,431 to 5,050) compared with the same period for 2015, and within that group the number of cocaine users increased only slightly from 368 to 423.

[Hong Kong police seize cocaine worth HK\\$100m in big anti-drug operation](#) [1]

Government statistics are compiled from information provided by law enforcement agencies, treatment and welfare agencies, tertiary institutions, hospitals and clinics.

But they do not reflect the true picture of cocaine taking in Hong Kong, according to those working at grass-roots level.

### On the street

The drug has been increasingly available on the street in popular nightlife spots such as Wan Chai and Tsim Sha Tsui since the mid-2000s and once users find a regular dealer, they report being able to get a bag of cocaine delivered in just 10 minutes.

A gram of cocaine generally costs HK\$1,000 but can cost as little as HK\$600, according to the Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers (SARDA), which has provided free support services for local drug users since 1961.

The drug's falling price means it is increasingly affordable for the lower middle-classes. The charity's executive director, Angelique Tam, said while cocaine was traditionally seen as a party drug which white male expats experimented with, her organisation was supporting addicts from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, as well as an increasing number of women.

[Why bankers and cocaine are best of friends](#) [2]

She also claimed the problem among the local Chinese community was likely to be even bigger than her organisation had encountered, because cultural barriers prevented some addicts from seeking help.

“They feel so ashamed,” she said. “They do not know the solution. They are afraid their family might call the police, which is not a helpful strategy. We really have to try to tackle the issue of drug abuse hiddenness here.

“Stereotyping is a real issue for drug users in Hong Kong, and how they can reintegrate into society.

“We should really look out for each other and try to identify anyone who is in trouble, in order to help them seek help earlier.”

### Peer pressure

Sky Siu, executive director of the KELY Support Group, a charity that focuses on drug and alcohol prevention among young people, said she considered young people of all ethnic backgrounds to be vulnerable to experimenting with cocaine, adding that it was increasingly affordable to the middle-classes.

“Hong Kong Chinese teenagers are facing the same pressures as any teenagers in the city,” she said.

Siu said that teenagers stressed from excessive studying or those suffering from eating disorders might be particularly tempted to try cocaine.

“Cocaine has a specific effect on people,” she said. “It is a highly addictive stimulant. It makes you really awake. When young people are under stress over having to study, there are some people who might not feel confident in their own abilities and they might turn to this drug.

“Cocaine is also an appetite suppressant. If you are already suffering from other major health problems like anorexia and bulimia, then you might think cocaine will help you.”

Siu said that since 2014 there had been a clear increase in the use of cocaine among those aged under 21.

“You cannot just tell people not to take cocaine. We want to be as preventative as possible, and give young people the facts about drugs.”

The chairman of the government’s Action Committee Against Narcotics, Dr Ben Cheung, this year admitted that Hong Kong’s “hidden drug abuse”, particularly among the city’s youth, urgently needed addressing.

### Cocaine trafficking

Hong Kong customs officials appear to be stepping up seizures as the amount of the drug being trafficked here rises. The influx has contributed to the dip in the street value of cocaine.

Figures show total cocaine seizures rose 20.8 per cent to 145kg in the first four months of the year, from 120kg in the same period last year. Between January and October this year, 536kg of cocaine, worth about HK\$550 million, was seized by the Hong Kong police and customs officials in scores of raids.

When young people are under stress over having to study ... they might turn to this drug

Sky Siu, KELY Support Group



A cocaine seizure at the airport last year. The drugs were hidden in the false compartment of a briefcase. Photo: Government Information Services Large  
 seizures at Hong Kong International Airport are well publicised by customs officials. In July officers found liquid cocaine worth HK\$15 million [injected into 98 dragon fruits](#) [3] from Colombia. It was the first time the method had been used for drug concealment in about two decades, insiders said.

The Customs and Excise Department told the *Post* it used “a risk management approach to combat drug trafficking. Advanced equipment such as Ion scanners and X-ray machines as well as drug detector dogs are also deployed to assist in the interception of illegal drugs”.

It said it seized about 116kg of cocaine from passengers at the airport from January to October 2016.

Officials have blamed the influx of the drug on Mexico’s infamous [Sinaloa cartel](#) [4].

Anyone convicted of trafficking cocaine to Hong Kong can face a maximum fine of HK\$5 million and life imprisonment.

### Cost of rehabilitation

Dr Seamus MacAuly, a drugs counsellor at private drugs rehabilitation centre The Cabin, based in Central, said cocaine was the second most common addiction he and his colleagues were treating, adding that most addicts also had problems with at least one other substance, such as alcohol or cannabis.

He said he was generally treating white male professionals in their 30s, but that the centre’s remit as an English-speaking service with outpatient fees of HK\$36,900 for three months would be restricting his client base.

“It is rife in that community,” he said. “It is so easily accessible. You talk to a patient here and all of his 20 friends will be doing it too. I see people getting out of control on this drug. I think people just want to have more fun and if they are not doing it then in some social groups they are seen as a bit of a nerd.”

## Broader trends

Despite the rising popularity of cocaine, between 2004 and 2013 ketamine was the most popular psychotropic substance being abused in Hong Kong, according to the CRDA. Since 2010, cocaine ranked fourth most popular of the psychotropic substances, after triazolam, midazolam and zopiclone. Smoking was the preferred method of taking cocaine (54 per cent) and, broadly, more users were male than female, the report found.

**Topics:** City Weekend

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[1] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/1977378/hong-kong-police-seize-cocaine-worth-hk100m-big-anti-drug>

[2] <http://www.scmp.com/business/article/2041361/why-bankers-and-cocaine-are-best-friends>

[3] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/1992262/enter-dragon-fruit-liquid-cocaine-worth-hk15-million-found>

[4] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1418852/mexican-cartel-smuggling-cocaine-hong-kong-amid-booming-demand-drugs>