

## Young Hongkongers' easy access to illicit drugs – Ice, ketamine, marijuana – raises alarm

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Lifestyle > Health & Beauty

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*Counsellors warn parents to be aware of drug abuse signs and to educate themselves and their children about the risks of illicit drug use*

Drug counsellors in Hong Kong are concerned young people aren't receiving sufficient education on the effects that illegal and potentially dangerous substances can have on their health.

As drugs become easier to access and policing becomes more challenging, tackling the number of users through education, early intervention and access to help and information is crucial, experts say.

### [Chinese parents feed stimulants to teens to pass senior high school entrance exams](#) [1]

Sky Siu is the director of the KELY Support Group, a local NGO which offers support to young people between the ages of 14 and 24 from Chinese- and English-speaking backgrounds in Hong Kong.

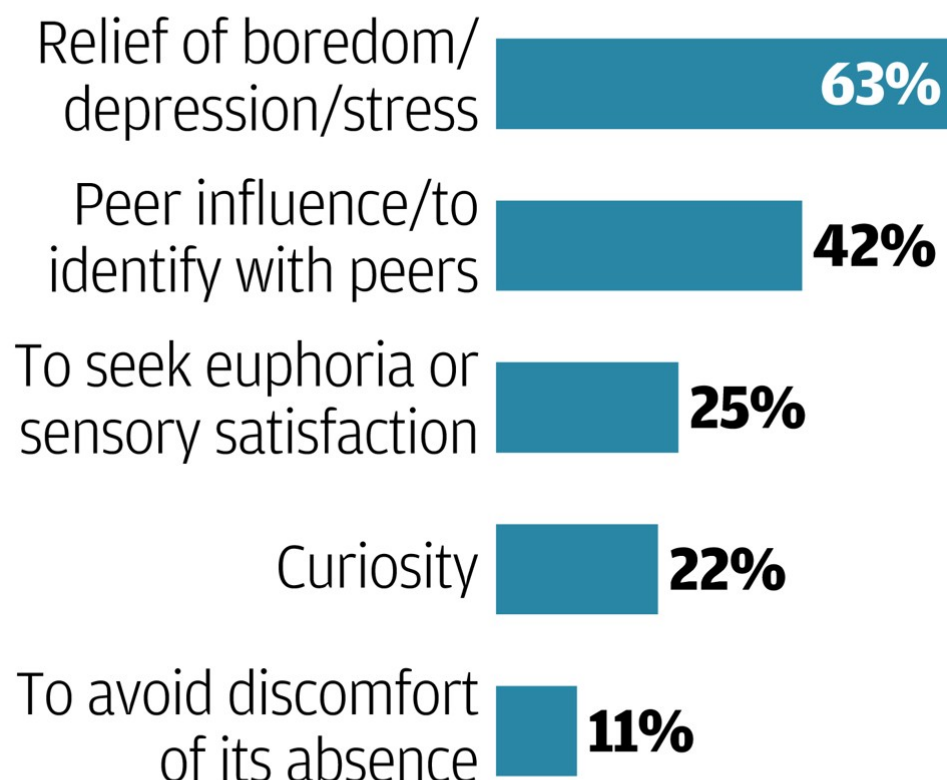


“Narcotics division statistics tell us that the top three reasons for young people doing drugs in 2017 was relief of mental states, like boredom, depression or stress, peer pressure and curiosity,” Siu

says. “These are all areas we need to help young people build resilience in. Understanding why they’re choosing to access drugs is important.”

## Reason for current drug use

Aged under 21



*Figures are for 1st quarter of 2017*

Source : Central Registry of Drug Abuse

SCMP

Government figures indicate that methamphetamine, also known as crystal meth or Ice, is the most widely used drug among all age groups. The use of the drug is particularly prevalent among women under 21, new drug users and those living in Sham Shui Po, Hong Kong’s poorest district.

### [Hong Kong’s illegal drug problem is worse than official numbers suggest: addiction counsellors \[2\]](#)

The numbers, released in June by the Hong Kong government’s narcotics division, show an 18 per cent decline in the total number of drug abusers (from 2,692 to 2,212) in the first quarter of 2017, compared to the same period in 2016. However, the Action Committee Against Narcotics (ACAN), which issued the report, stated that methamphetamine abuse still warranted attention.

### [Crystal meth – Hong Kong in denial over drug epidemic \[3\]](#)

ACAN chairman Ben Cheung warned that Ice can cause hallucinations, delirium and permanent brain damage, and promised a new round of anti-drugs publicity campaigns to target teens tempted to dabble in drugs during the summer holidays. Meanwhile, the commissioner for narcotics, Manda Chan, said in a statement: “We will continue to collaborate with different organisations to implement suitable preventive education and publicity programmes at workplaces or venues frequented by young adults to promote healthy lifestyles and positive attitudes against drug temptation.”



KELY programme coordinator Katherine Hampton says in the past decade “ketamine was the number one drug seen in overdoses. But in the last six to nine months, that trend has shifted towards crystal meth. All of us in the drug community in Hong Kong are concerned about this sudden shift.”

KELY’s work focuses primarily on early intervention through educating students and their parents around the types of drugs on the market and their effects. “We’ve found a lot of parents aren’t aware,” Siu says. “Teachers and parents need to want to know [about drugs] as well. If you’re someone with young people in your life, you need to be aware of how accessible drugs are and you need to know how to support them.”

Recognising the important role parents and carers can play in prevention, the government’s narcotics division launched a “Star Parents Programme”, which included anti-drug events encouraging parents to visit schools, and a 26-episode series of interviews broadcast on RTHK5’s radio programme *Stand By Me*.

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## Police will help schools prevent drug abuse, says Hong Kong researcher [4]

However, Hampton believes there aren't enough drug counsellors working in Hong Kong, with non-Chinese-speaking or ethnic minority groups needing urgent attention.

"The government has done a fantastic job setting up clinics for people suffering with addiction," Hampton says. "But when it comes to people who are experimenting or are curious, there aren't enough resources."

smoked at  
Woodstock

Dr Seamus MacAuley, The Cabin



Dr Seamus MacAuley is a counsellor at international addiction rehab and treatment centre The Cabin. The organisation's facilities include a young person's unit in Chiang Mai, Thailand, which treats patients as young as 14.

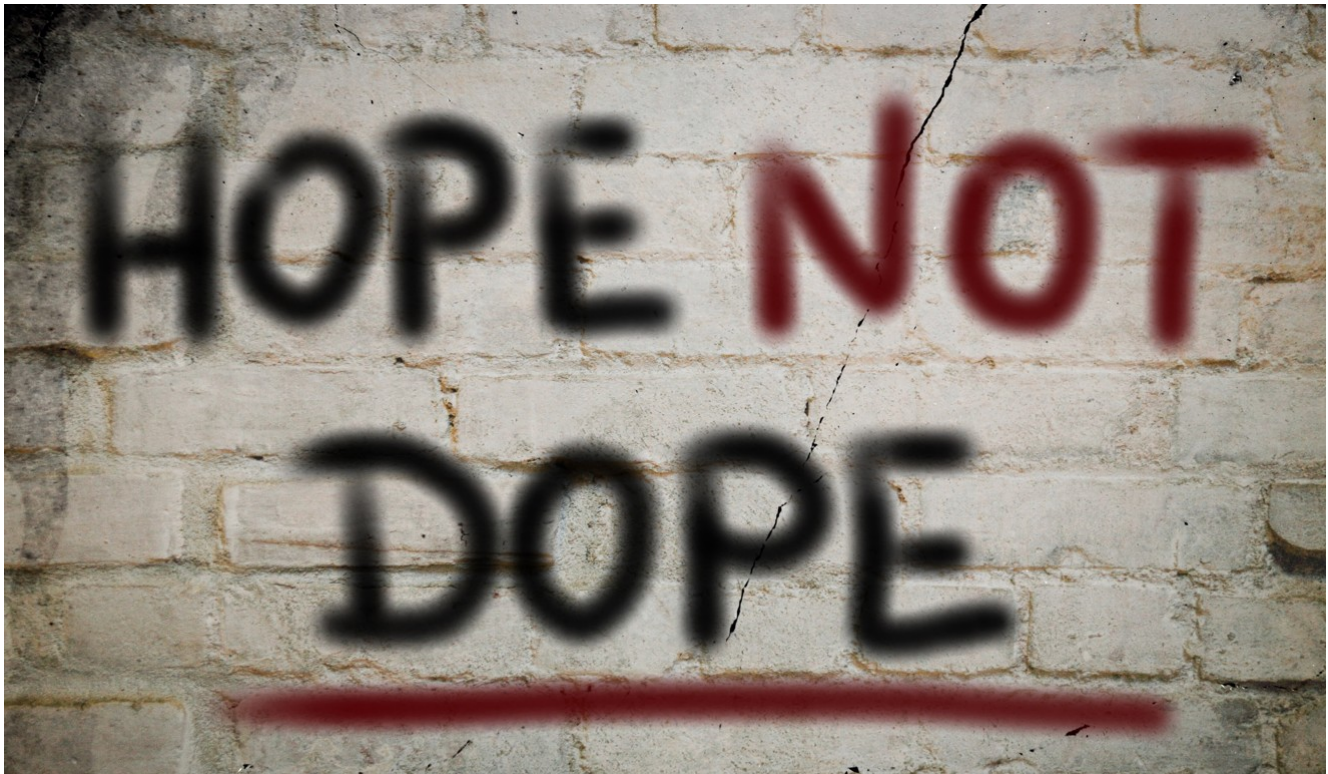
MacAuley shared the case of a 17-year-old addict, Eric (not his real name), from an Australian expat family, who recently completed a three-month stay at The Cabin's Chiang Mai facility.

"He had difficulties from an early age. It all started occurring when he was 14 or 15 when he got kicked out of boarding school for smoking pot," MacAuley says. Eric's substance abuse began with



alcohol, before he moved on to cannabis, cough syrup (which can contain codeine, an opiate), and eventually heroin.

“He kept this very secret until he couldn’t hide it any more. His schoolwork started going [downhill], his parents noticed personality changes and conflict at home,” MacAuley recalls. “He was becoming sicker and his world was unravelling.”



MacAuley says that Eric was “very resistant” to intervention. He escaped from the Thai facility, relapsed and had to be brought back and re-engaged in the programme. Now, Eric is out of treatment and has a strong chance of recovery due to his young age.

MacAuley says there’s been a drop in opiates use and a rise in synthetics, or “party drugs”, among The Cabin’s patients, pointing to substances like GBL, mephedrone and ecstasy. His observations are backed by customs data, which show a rise of 157 per cent in the amount of GBL, or gamma-butyrolactone, seized at the border from 2015 to 2016. The drug is derived from gamma-hydroxybutyric acid, or GHB, a depressant popular among the city’s party crowd in the early 2000s.

#### [Hong Kong girl, 15, and two others arrested in HK\\$20 million cocaine bust](#) [5]

Hong Kong classified GHB as a dangerous drug in 2001, which gave rise to GBL, a colourless liquid commonly used as a wheel rim cleaner. Hong Kong began to control GBL as a dangerous drug in 2012, but its industrial applications make it difficult to regulate.

GBL is less favoured on the rave scene these days, but issues still arise in its use as a date rape drug and the likelihood of it being combined with other depressants, like alcohol, or stimulants, like cocaine, to produce unpredictable effects.



The availability of drugs on the dark web, an encrypted level of the internet where it is easier to avoid detection, has made buying illegal substances almost as easy as buying a new hairdryer from Taobao. “It’s not a case of scoring on a street corner any more,” MacAuley says. “You can buy online, get it from your taxi driver, or have it delivered with your pizza. Police can’t keep up with the dealing or the spectrum of chemicals that’s out there.”





But navigating the dark web or having the number of a dealer could be beyond the reach of many young people who are trying drugs for the first time. “The number one way young people access drugs is through friends of friends – someone slightly outside their peer circle,” Hampton says. “That’s why we encourage peer support to create a safe and supportive environment among peers – so they’ll hopefully make the decision not to use drugs.”

The long-term health effects of drug use depend on the substance. Cannabis, the subject of legalisation debates across the world, can affect people’s mental health long after they have stopped using, says MacAuley. Heavy cannabis use can provoke psychotic breaks, he notes.

“Whenever I hear of youngsters smoking cannabis, I know we’re talking about a different drug than the kind that was smoked at

Young people are being affected by opioids left, right and centre, and

Woodstock,” he says. “It’s got the capacity to damage people permanently.”

A drug habit that starts before adulthood carries greater risks for young people’s physiological health. “We’re seeing a lot of mental health disorders,” Hampton says. “We’re concerned about young people’s development. The earlier they start dabbling in these substances, the more serious an effect it has on their brains, which aren’t fully developed until their mid-20s.

“Drugs are going to affect the way they process things, function and whether they’ll be a productive contributing member of society.”

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KELY’s Sky Siu

### [Kick-boxing course helps Hong Kong drug abusers kick the habit](#) [6]

Hong Kong’s drug use is widespread, but it’s not quite at the critical levels seen in certain areas of the United States. Siu, who recently returned from a trip to Massachusetts, was disturbed by what is being described as an “opium epidemic” across America. “Young people are being affected by opioids left, right and centre, and it’s come out of nowhere,” she says.

“We have to learn from the US – we don’t want to wait until we have an epidemic. We need to start now, be proactive and really home in on the fact that drug and alcohol issues aren’t things that happen to another family. It’s something that could very well happen to yours and can drastically change your entire life.”

### **An impressive juggling act**

KELY Support Group has been providing the city’s youth with drug counselling support and workshops for more than 20 years. One of its more interesting programmes is Get Positive, which uses circus skills (yes, juggling and diabolo training ) to help students from secondary schools deal with stress and boost their confidence (KELY was the first NGO in Hong Kong granted certified Social Circus Training from Cirque du Monde, a social circus programme created by the famous Cirque du Soleil in 1995 that helps at-risk youth).

The Social Circus Training component of the programme provides peer support and social circus skills in schools, while the Juggling Circle helps participants develop confidence and peer support. In 2016, it worked with more than 10,000 young people in the city in 43 different schools. Email [info@kely.org](mailto:info@kely.org) [7] for details.

### **More on this:**

[Police will help schools prevent drug abuse, says Hong Kong researcher](#) [4]

[Chinese parents feed stimulants to teens to pass senior high school entrance exams](#) [1]

[Crystal meth - Hong Kong in denial over drug epidemic](#) [3]

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[Kick-boxing course helps Hong Kong drug abusers kick the habit](#) [8]

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### **Links**

[1] <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2102517/chinese-parents-feed-stimulants-teens-pass-senior-high-school>

[2] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1828168/hong-kongs-illegal-drug-problem-worse-official-numbers-suggest>

[3] <http://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/article/1826366/crystal-meth-hong-kong-denial-over-drug-addiction-epidemic>

[4] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1272024/police-will-help-schools-prevent-drug>



abuse-says-hong-kong-researcher

[5] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/law-crime/article/2101520/hong-kong-girl-15-and-two-others-arrested-hk20-million>

[6] <http://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/health-beauty/article/2102643/hong-kong-youths-easy-access-illicit-drugs-ice-ketamine>

[7] <mailto:info@kely.org>

[8] <http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/health-environment/article/1853974/kick-boxing-course-helps-hong-kong-drug-abusers>