Monitoring Recent Changes of Cross-border Drug Use and Their Implications for Prevention/Control Strategies

**Background**

Cross-border drug use has continued to be a serious concern of the law enforcements. In 2011, there were 821 or one in every thirteen drug abusers being reported to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse (CRDA) for taking drugs in the Mainland (mainly in Shenzhen), of which 87.8% of them were adults aged 21 or above.[[1]](#footnote-1) Among psychotropic substances, ketamine was still the most commonly abused type (31.5%) despite its declining trend. Reports of cocaine abuse, in contrast, continued to grow in recent years. Meanwhile, the latest 2011/12 Survey of Drug Use among Students[[2]](#footnote-2) indicated up to 34.3% of lifetime drug-taking respondents had taken drugs outside Hong Kong, whereas 65.3% of those 30-day drug-takers did so. Among those students who had taken drugs outside Hong Kong, more than three-fifth (63.9%) had done so in “Mainland China/ Macao” (71.9% for 30-day drug-taking students). The most commonly reported places in which students took drug were “Shenzhen” (lifetime: 35.1%; 30-days: 38.4%), followed by Macao (lifetime: 19.2%; 30-days: 28.5%), Guangzhou (lifetime: 19.1% ; 30-days: 27.7%), Dongguan (lifetime: 18.6%; 30-days: 28.0%) and Zhuhai (lifetime: 15.1%; 30-days: 24.2%).

While cross-border drug use has become a social problem in Hong Kong with the continual economic and social integration of the Pearl River Delta area, most previous local research on this topic has focused mainly on drug-taking behavior of the younger ages (Cheung, Lee and Tang 2001)[[3]](#footnote-3) and was conducted in earlier years (Lau 2003)[[4]](#footnote-4). Little has been done in recent years to investigate the current situation and patterns of cross-border drug activities among the Hong Kong citizens. On the contrary, research efforts by Mainland law enforcement counterpart on this social phenomenon have increased substantially, pointing out several reasons for the persisting cross-border drug problem (Xu 2009)[[5]](#footnote-5). Frequently the first reason cited was the proximity-mobility factor or time-space compression: with the opening of the *e*-channels and installation of other facilitating measures, the immigration border has speeded up its processing of travelers and made it very convenient for potential drug users to visit Shenzhen. Drug market was often cited as the second cause: generally speaking, the price of drugs in Mainland was lower than that in Hong Kong, which attracted many potential drug users. The lower risk of apprehension or detection in conducting such illegal leisure in the entertainment premises in Mainland was the third main reason of cross-border drug use. Crackdown on youths’ cross-border drug activities has stepped up since the former Chief Executive Donald Tsang expressed his concern about easy access to drugs in Shenzhen for Hong Kong youth in 2008/2009 (Lo 2011[[6]](#footnote-6)). The anti-drug measures taken by the law enforcers in Mainland included temporary detention of Hong Kong residents who were detected for taking drugs, continual patrol in discos and clubs that were drug hotspots, and cooperation with Hong Kong law enforcement agencies for intelligence sharing and strategic operations.

Nevertheless, it remains unknown how these deterrent government actions affect the changing composition of cross-border drug users and the pattern of cross-border drug consumption. The decisions to take drugs or not, to use what types of drugs, and to stay in Hong Kong or go to Mainland depend on the comparative perceptions of the efficacy of the sanctions. How various drug users perceive the new sanction risk remains an unknown subject. For instance, how effective is the deportation and detention policy in Mainland in deterring Hong Kong citizens’ cross-border drug use? As the sanction risk fluctuates in recent years, some unexpected cross-border drug trends may be emerging that requires proactive research to monitor and then suggest suitable responses at the policy level. Like other criminal justice policies with deterrence purposes (Nagin 1998[[7]](#footnote-7)), there is a large gap in knowledge on the links between drug policies and actual drug-use behaviors, calling for an urgent need to estimate the effectiveness of policy options for deterring drug use across the borders. According to Nagin (1998), such analyses must estimate not only short-term consequences of drug policy but its long-term effects, which may be ineffective or even criminogenic. Since the strict law-enforcement measures on cross-border drug use have been enacted for more than five years, it is appropriate to catch the relatively long-term consequences of the policies at this stage. Nagin (1998) further suggests in fact there are varying effectiveness estimates concerning a drug policy across different units. Thus it is necessary to collect evaluations across the borders (the local and Mainland departments) and directly get information from cross-border drug users and general public. MacCoun (1993)[[8]](#footnote-8) also points out some unintended or counterproductive consequences of the deterrence anti-drug model, such as downplaying informal social controls and increasing hidden users. Unfortunately, few studies have been done in Hong Kong to examine these mechanisms.

On the other hand, the normalization of drug use has already occurred globally and influenced people from various social classes and sociodemographic groups (Parker et al. 1998; Parker 2005)[[9]](#footnote-9). Men and women, students and working adults, and the rich and the poor might all involve into cross-border drug use. Previous research so far has only addressed this drug problem associated with youth in Hong Kong and we need to know more about the broader population in terms of cross-border drug activities in recent years. Moreover, although a substantial number of young drug abusers from the early 2000s ‘drug wave’ have ceased to take drugs in later part of their life course, especially after entering into young adulthood (Dewit, Offord and Wong 1997)[[10]](#footnote-10), those who sustain their drug habit might need to adjust their cross-border drug consumption patterns in accordance with changes in their life-course. Again we have little knowledge of this particular group of young adult drug abusers graduating from the 2000s drug epidemic. Are they still taking social drugs like ketamine in Mainland with friends? Are there any changes in terms of their drug behaviors and drug abusing networks? Why? Cross-border psychotropic substance use among Hong Kong residents often co-occurs with alcohol use and sexual risk behaviors (Lau, Tsui and Lam 2007)[[11]](#footnote-11). From a public health angle, we also wonder whether there is a change in cross-border drug use affecting the above high risk behavioral patterns and if so, toward which direction. Lastly, trafficking of narcotics constituted yet another problem (Li and Gao 2004[[12]](#footnote-12)) that requires a continuing review of the latest information collected from official reports, academic literature, news, and public discourse at both local, regional and global level.

**Objectives**

Our proposed research aims to explore and monitor the recent changes of cross-border drug use in Hong Kong and to evaluate the current cross-border drug policies through both qualitative and quantitative methods. It will make contributions to the existing “e-Drug Stats” (quantitative) and “Drug Intelligence” (qualitative) modules and provide suggestions on new policy makings. First, we plan to collect data on current cross-border drug scene via extensive qualitative methods: archival analysis, focus group interviews and face-to-face in-depth interviews in particular. We will invite informants from various NGOs (Evangelical Lutheran Church Hong Kong基督教香港信義會, The Society for the Aid and Rehabilitation of Drug Abusers香港戒毒會, The Society of Rehabilitation and Crime Prevention, Hong Kong香港善導會), police officers, and custom officers on both sides of the borders. A large-scale quantitative survey (sample size is 1,500) will also be conducted targeting at travelers at various border control areas. In general, information concerning the patterns, characteristics, social/political/legal background, and consequences of cross-border drug use, as well as insider/outsider knowledge of the effectiveness of the current cross-border drug policies will be collected.

We will also proactively identify issues that would facilitate policy review. To grasp the most updated and comprehensive picture of cross-border drug use, we will monitor official publications, professional literature (e.g. journal articles and academic websites), and lay culture embedded in public domains like pop magazines newspapers, and internet chat groups. We are also prepared to integrate and analyze our findings in this project with data available from the current quantitative modules and qualitative modules, as well as CRDA statistics managed by the Security Bureau. A half-year progress report will be submitted for consideration by the RAG while special findings will be delivered to ND and ACAN for deliberation on policy responses.

**Research Methodology**

*Qualitative component targeting at law-enforcement agencies and drug users*

Due to the explorative nature of the study, a variety of qualitative methods will first be used to catch a relatively complete picture of recent cross-border substance abuse by collecting information from the law-enforcers who deal with this issue directly and routinely in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen: (1) archival research in both cities to get the official statistics, internal reports and policy documents related to substance users with Hong Kong citizenship; (2) in-depth interviews (or focus groups) with drug-control legal practitioners in HK/Shenzhen custom and police departments to account for the official archives, to get familiarity about the legal environment and social background of the cases, to share with us their first-hand experience and understandings about cross-border substance abuse, and their evaluations about the current HK-Shenzhen collaborations on drug control plus suggestions for further improvement. Both in-depth interviews and focus groups would be semi-structured with interview guidelines to follow. All interview records and notes are confidential and only for research purpose. PI and Co-Is will conduct the interviews by themselves with the assistance of a part-time RA.

This qualitative part is feasible for two reasons. First, PI’s department has had research connections with police and custom in Hong Kong. We have gained collaborations from HK police in several research projects. Dr. Ng David Ka-Sing, the ex-head of Crime Investigation Division of Hong Kong Police Force, received his PhD degree from our department (PI is his thesis committee Chair) and is currently one of our adjunct assistant professors. Our department just organized the International Conference on Cybercrime and Computer Forensic at the end of August 2013. Nine custom officers actively participated into the conference and Mr. Alfred Ho, the assistant commissioner of the customs and excise department of Hong Kong, delivered an opening speech as a distinguished guest.

Second, Prof. Xu Jianhua, one Co-I of this project and also a key member of Pearl River Delta Social Research Center, has close research and personal contacts with police force in Guangdong province. His major research area is policing and he has conducted several projects in Guangdong using the methods of interviewing police officers there. Moreover, he originally was a police officer and an instructor in Guangdong police academy. Shenzhen police has been keen on collaborations with the custom department in terms of drug control. The police then could help us connect with Shenzhen custom. In short, Prof. Xu would have abilities and sufficient experience to recruit the interviewees and get useful documents from the Shenzhen side. His research collaborator at Guangdong Police Academy, Prof. Yang, is an expert on drug studies in China and he has sent us a supporting letter to indicate that he would help us contact Shenzhen law-enforcement agencies as well.

To validate the results obtained from the law-enforcement agencies and reduce bias, we will also conduct six focus groups for drug users in Hong Kong: two for ages below 18 (one male and one female group), two for ages 18-25 (one male and one female group), and two for ages 26 and above (one male and one female group). All participants should have cross-border drug use experience in the past 12 months. We will ask questions about their cross-border drug activities and their impressions on the current cross-border drug policies in both Hong Kong and Shenzhen. By comparing their answers with the responses from law enforcers, the deterrence effects of the policies can be better estimated. For adult participants, we will try to identify the differences or consistencies between their cross-border drug use when they were young and in recent years from a life-course perspective. It is feasible because at least three key members in our PRD center (including Dr. Lee, Co-I of this project) have close collaborations with drug-related NGOs in Hong Kong.

*Quantitative component targeting at cross-border substance users*

Official records and impressions often underestimate the situation since most cross-border drug users in reality cannot be identified and caught by law enforcers. We thus need a large-scale survey on mass travelers at the border to grasp more direct information about the sociodemographic profiles of cross-border substance abusers and their drug use patterns in both Mainland China and Hong Kong in the past 12 months. By including questions on their attitudes and knowledge on drug use itself and drug-related policies, this survey also carries on the purposes of drug education and policy evaluation. For example, the respondents who know little about the harm of drug use and the existing anti-drug policies might learn it from our questionnaire. Moreover, the survey itself delivers a strong message to the general public that drug use is not tolerable in Hong Kong society and both the government and the research agencies are proactively to improve their responses to the problem.

The results of our qualitative component will facilitate us to design an anonymous standardized questionnaire. Prior to the commencement of the survey, a pilot study will be arranged to pre-test the questionnaire. The target participants of this self-report survey are cross-border Hong Kong citizens in the age group of 15 and above. In the 2011/2012 narcotics division survey on drug use among students of Hong Kong, researchers find that the prevalence of drug use surged greatly since age 15. Younger kids are more likely to be controlled by parents and less likely to go to Mainland China by themselves or with peers. Moreover, the 2002-2011 report from Central Registry of Drug Abuse indicates that males aged 51+ and females aged 41+ have extremely low risks to be drug abusers (Table 1b).[[13]](#footnote-13) In the present survey, we thus focus on female travelers aged 15-40 and male travelers aged 15-50. Respondents will be invited to participate in the study when they returned to Hong Kong from Mainland China via the Lo Wu, Lok Ma Chau, and Huanggang checkpoint, the major three checkpoints for pedestrians between Hong Kong and Shenzhen. Such type of nonprobability convenience sampling method has been adopted in previous surveys concerning cross-border public health issues (Lange and Voas 2000[[14]](#footnote-14); Lau and Wong 2000[[15]](#footnote-15); Lau et al. 2004[[16]](#footnote-16); Lau, et al. 2007[[17]](#footnote-17)). For instance, in a large scale survey conducted in 2002 concerning cross-boundary substance use among Hong Kong Chinese young adults, the convenience sample contained 11,479 cross-border travelers (though very few were drug users) and more than 50% of the respondents were recruited at Lo Wu checkpoint (Lau, et al. 2007[[18]](#footnote-18)). These previous studies all agree that although valuable, it is difficult to obtain a generalizable sample to deduct the cross-border drug prevalence since there is not a complete list of cross-border population and researchers could not draw a strict random sample based on the list. Therefore, the primary objective of the current proposed research is to maximize our contact with cross-border travelers who are risky to use drugs to identify risk factors for their cross-border drug-taking and to collect their knowledge/views on current drug policies as the main target population of these polices. These risk factors and opinions are possible to be generalized to larger population and have broad policy implications. With this in mind, we will use a rough quota sampling method and train our interviewers to approach fixed percentages of age and gender groups. The quota will be mainly based on the age and gender distributions reported in census statistics of Hong Kong. To ensure recruitment of adequate target drug abusers, survey interviewers will be only deployed to reach eligible respondents at the three checkpoints during peak-hours when cross-border drug abusers return to Hong Kong after their possible consumption of drugs in Mainland China. The peak-hour periods will be selected on the basis of our qualitative component which collect such information from experienced drug control officers and identified drug abusers. For example, if Monday mornings and Sunday evenings are peak hours, we will conduct the survey at these time slots and the interviewers may need around one month (four weekends) to reach 1,500 respondents. Besides selecting peak hours, the interviewers will also be trained to identify the most risky groups based on certain behavioral characteristics. Their judgmental criteria are subjective information provided by “experts”, including drug control officers and drug users in our qualitative study. Such purposive sampling is especially useful to select members of a difficult-to-reach, deviant population especially those involving public health issues.[[19]](#footnote-19) With a combination of convenience sampling, quota sampling and purposive sampling, the proposed survey shall be able to locate as many potential cross-border drug users as possible and at the same time improve its representativeness.

Given the sensitivity of answering such questions at the border control, some respondents may be reluctant to reveal the truth of their drug taking behavior. The current research has incorporated three procedural measures to mediate the underreporting problem caused by such sensitivity issue. The first focuses on the questionnaire design. Sensitive questions are kept to the end of the questionnaire so as to minimize the risk of break-offs (Tourangeau and Yan 2007[[20]](#footnote-20)). Questions concerning respondent’s perception of cross-border drug policy will be asked at the transitional stage of the questionnaire to achieve the goal of policy evaluation even if some of the respondents finally decline to answer the more sensitive one. Several questions related to acquaintance’s drug use in the questionnaire will also be included. For example, respondents will be asked if they know any HK citizens using drugs in Mainland China in the past year. Follow-up questions concerning this acquainted person will then be asked, for example the locations of drug use, the types of drug abused and how often the interviewees witness such act. On one hand, these questions will indicate the prevalence of interviewees attending a high risk situation where drug is available and negative peer influence may exist, despite the fact that she/he may deny a direct participation in drug taking behavior. On the other hand, such questionnaire design may implicitly expand our sample size and include more drug users’ information by raising questions on the respondents’ social network. Secondly, all interviewers will be well trained to approach the potential respondents, and to provide standardized instructions to them and proper debriefs after the respondents have completed the survey. All respondents will be reassured about the anonymity and confidentiality of the survey. Thirdly, the survey will be carried out in an isolated corner away from the officials at the border control with tables and chairs arranged to maximize respondents’ privacy level. The questionnaire will be self-administered by the respondents after interviewers’ initial instructions.

Although it is newly established, our Pearl River Delta social research center has completed three large-scale surveys in the region, including the project on cross-border families of Hong Kong funded by Central Policy Unit in 2012-2013. Most professors in our center have sufficient experience to manage and supervise surveys and our students also have solid trainings on social research methods. We will select the most experienced students to be our survey interviewers.

*Developing a digital archival database on cross-border substance use*

The third component of this project involves advanced computer techniques to help HK government and scholars continuously monitor online news and literature on cross-border substance use. We will first identify relevant websites of major media, magazines, governmental agencies, NGO, discussion forums, research centers, and academic journals. Our technician will then help us develop a computer program to automatically search keywords in our suggested list and publish the news, articles, reports and essays about this issue in the official website of Pearl River Delta social research center (as a host website). This program will also be able to update the publications after a regular period (i.e. bi-monthly). One PhD student in our department has developed a similar program for other social topics and the technician of this project can then design the digital archival database based on his program.

The final monitoring system reflected in the host website contains five major modules: (1) mass media; (2) official policies, reports and statistics; (3) academic publications; (4) NGOs and others; (5) this particular research report of cross-border substance abuse by interviewing legal practitioners and surveying cross-border travelers (if possible, this study could be conducted biannually using the same framework and questionnaire/interview guidelines). The five modules form a holistic approach to provide us the most updated archival database with minimal maintenance so that the policy makers and frontline practitioners could have comprehensive understandings of the ongoing changes of the situation and adjust their strategies accordingly.

**Number and nature of subjects involved**

1. 15 law-enforcement officers (custom and police) in Hong Kong
2. 15 law-enforcement officers (custom and police) in Shenzhen
3. 30 drug users (below 18, 18-25, 26 and above) in Hong Kong who have cross-border drug use experience
4. 1,500 Hong Kong citizens (ages 15-50 for males and ages 15-40 for females) who returned to Hong Kong from Shenzhen through three major checkpoints (500 in each checkpoint)

**Research Activities to be conducted and schedules**

PhaseI 01/2014-03/2014: contacting custom and police departments in Hong Kong

and Shenzhen to identify possible interviewees and collect

relevant official documents and statistics; contacting NGOs

to refer qualified drug users.

PhaseII 04/2014-08/2014: conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups in both

Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

PhaseIII 09/2014-11/2014: cleaning up all interview notes and records and analyzing

transcripts and archives through qualitative software.

PhaseIV 12/2014-02/2015: designing the survey questionnaire based on the

qualitative results, setting up the sampling plan, administering the pilot study, hiring and training survey interviewers.

PhaseV 03/2015-04/2015: conducting the survey at three checkpoints and data entry.

Phase VI 05/2014-09/2015: data analysis and at the same time starting the monitoring program design by identifying a list of major source websites and keywords for automatic searching.

Phase VII 10/2015-12/2015: developing the five modules, designing the host webpage, adjusting and finalizing the integrative monitoring system.

**Milestones and interim deliverables**

1. Previous studies on cross-border drug issues mainly focus on the Hong Kong side and ignore the Mainland parties involved mainly due to the lack of access. The qualitative component of this research is the first effort to integrate the legal perspectives in both areas. Future studies can continue to use our existing network in Shenzhen law-enforcement agencies and the similar research frame to trace the situation and evaluate the policies regularly. This approach is also consistent with the long-term priority of Narcotics Division and the global trend in terms of drug control/prevention strategies: to strengthen external co-operation and research.
2. Official records and views toward substance use are often criticized to be biased due to political and resource constraints. The interviews on drug users by social worker referral are very limited due to the small sample size. The self-report survey targeting at cross-border travelers is also at risk to miss some serious substance users since respondents tend to underreport the level of their drug use. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods applied in this study give us more comprehensive insights about the changing behavioral patterns of cross-border drug users and the social mechanisms behind the changes, plus an multi-dimensional estimation on the deterrence effects of the current harsh cross-border drug policies. The current HK-Shenzhen collaborations in terms of drug control will be evaluated and suggestions will be made for further improvements. Drug users in our focus groups and the general public in our survey also can be educated by receiving more knowledge about the current drug policies and the harm of drug use.
3. The project will produce an integrated archival database with the function of automatic searching and updating. This system will closely monitor the most recent changes of cross-border substance use from media, official departments, academia, NGOs and other relevant websites. The research report based on our interviews and large-scale surveys will also be included. All the five modules will be published and updated in a user-friendly web platform attached to our Pearl River Delta Social Research Center webpage. This could be a sample template for future similar studies. For example, the computer program of this project can be easily revised on the basis of an extension of web source lists and keywords so that the government is able to trace the general situations of substance use in Hong Kong. The modified platform can be directly linked to the homepage of Narcotics Division.

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