

Drug Use Reporting by a Population of Thai Partners Working near U.S. Military Installations

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OBJECTIVES: Drug use and addiction may be costly to the individual and his society. These costs can include disruption in job performance, poorer health and involvement with other crimes. The ready availability of most "illicit" drugs and the high purity, easy availability, and low cost of heroin make this kind of behavior especially dangerous in Thailand.

The number of Thai drug users appears to be increasing, as the total number of people who come to the hospitals for drug treatment today is many times larger than the numbers reporting several years ago. The total number of heroin addicts in Thailand in 1972 was estimated as over 300,000; there were only 60,000 cases estimated in 1968. It is noteworthy that this number is over 0.8% of the total Thai population (about 36 million).

There is, however, little empirical data available on which to base decisions concerning relevant education, prevention, and treatment programs for drug use in Thailand. There have been no surveys conducted, and no formal research to study the prevalence and incidence of this problem. Few studies of the drug user exist; these have not been conceptually strong. Most data available in Thailand today is based on clinical impressions from individuals working in the drug abuse area, and inferences based on numbers of individuals seeking treatment.

Of particular interest to American authorities in Thailand (military, Embassy, etc.) is a determination of the extent to which Thai drug use affects incidence of American drug use. Information bearing on this point could be utilized to suggest decisions concerning more effective ways to control the problem of drug use among Americans in Thailand. Relevant decisions might be whether to allow Americans to live off of a military installation, whether to allow local nationals to utilize special facilities set up primarily for Americans in Thailand, the extent to which cross-cultural friendships should be encouraged, etc. The present study was designed to provide preliminary information on the amount of drug use reported by a specific Thai population, to infer how behavior of this population affects American drug use and to evaluate the feasibility of utilizing the interview technique to study drug use by this population.

METHOD:

Subjects: Four hundred and ninety-eight Thai women were interviewed. (Age range 16-48, average=26, S.D.=9.15). Average education was 3.1 years, S.D.=1.8. These women were primarily bar-girls or "hired-wives." A hired-wife is a woman paid to live with a man, and who in addition to being a sexual partner provides services such as house cleaning, cooking, laundry, etc. All women included had reported to the venereal disease Health Center at Kilo Sip, Thailand, to obtain a weekly check-up. An additional 20 women refused to cooperate; no information was collected from them.

Apparatus: A questionnaire designed to assess drug use by the subject, her friends, and U.S. servicemen partners was constructed. This was administered to 30 women and modified. A second revision was administered to 100 women and modified again to provide the final form of the questionnaire. Twenty-two study items were included, in addition to five "lead in" questions and five decoy questions. In addition, a ten item questionnaire dealing only with medical support and physical health questions was included.

Procedure: All women were interviewed in the Thai language by public health nurses from the South East Asia Treaty Organization Medical Research Laboratory (SMRL). Three nurses conducted all the interviews, with two nurses working on a given interview day. The women were first examined by the chief nurse of the Health Center, and following this she explained to each potential subject that a health survey was being conducted. The chief nurse would then introduce the subject to one of the SMRL nurses conducting interviews. Subjects were then transferred to one of two private offices for interview. Approximately five minutes were devoted to explaining the nature of the study and establishing rapport with the subjects. It was emphasized that this was a medical survey by a medical organization. Each prospective subject was allowed to refuse to answer questions. No names or identification numbers were asked. During this time it was ascertained that the women had not been previously interviewed. The ten medical questions were first asked. Following this the questionnaire from the present study was administered. All questions were orally asked of each respondent. Data were collected from January to May 1972.

RESULTS: Tables 1—4 present results based on the 497 subjects included in the study; the numbers in parentheses are actual frequencies. All per cent values are rounded to the nearest whole per cent. Responses to "lead in" and decoy questions are not presented. At the time of the study all subjects solicited only among American servicemen for partners. Individuals were considered "drug users" if they reported daily use of a drug for at least the previous 30 days. The exception to this is alcohol, the use of which had to be daily for the previous 90 days in order to classify a subject as a drug user.

Table 1 presents drug use characteristics for all 82 drug users. Alcohol and marijuana are reported most frequently; little amphetamine and barbiturate and no heroin or hallucinogen use is reported. Most drug users have utilized the drug more than 3 months and many more than a year. Fifty per cent of the subjects reported their first use was primarily motivated by the suggestion of a Thai friend, and an additional 11% reported an American friend first suggested the drug use.

Forty per cent of subjects indicated "ever use" of some drug (not including alcohol).

Table 2 presents data concerning alleged drug use by other Thai individuals living and working in proximity to the respondents. The respondents view many individuals as using some drug, most commonly marijuana or marijuana and barbiturates. Very little heroin, alcohol or amphetamine is reported used. In addition, about 1/3 of all subjects indicate over half of their friends are drug users. To determine the degree of involvement with Americans, respondents were asked if they had a steady American boyfriend. Steady was defined as existing when the women lived with only one partner or restricted herself to going out with one particular American male. Seventy per cent indicated they had a steady boyfriend. Of these 70%, 46% indicated that financial or other tangible advantages were their main reasons for maintaining their relationship. An additional 32% (175) indicated that financial advantages in addition to some emotional involvement were reasons to maintain the relationship, 10% (57) indicated that the sole reason for maintaining their relation was emotional involvement regardless of money, and 12% (67) indicated that neither emotional involvement nor financial benefits were important reasons to maintain their relationship.

Table 3 presents the reported drug use of the individuals with whom these Thai women maintain these relationships. A large percentage of "previous" boyfriends were reported to have used drugs. Marijuana is the drug most frequently reported used. Among present boyfriends a much smaller percentage allegedly use drugs. Again, marijuana is the drug most frequently reported used.

Ninety—eight per cent of all women said they do not like American boyfriends who use drugs. Table 4 presents some of the attitudes and influences which relate to drug use by the respondents' boyfriends and to the respondents themselves. Two per cent indicated that they encouraged their American boyfriends to use drugs. Fifty—two per cent indicated that they tried to stop their American boyfriends from using drugs. Few Americans are perceived as following the suggestions of these Thai women; and 48% of the women report that their boyfriends have encouraged drug use but at least 70% refused to follow these suggestions.

Those individuals who indicated that they do try to stop their American boyfriends from using drugs indicated using the following methods: "ask him to stop" 93% (241), "refuse sex" 5% (12), "refuse to buy drugs for him" 1% (1), "keep drugs away from him" 1% (1). The drugs of which the American is reported to encourage use are marijuana (87%), marijuana and some other drug (8%), alcohol, heroin, or barbiturate (5%).

DISCUSSION: Fifteen per cent (82) of the women in this study reported current use of some drug. Half of the women reported alcohol as the drug being used and about 1/4 reported using marijuana (See Table 1). Barbiturates were reported used by another 10% of subjects. It is apparent that this represents relatively long-term behavior. Sixty per cent of subjects indicated using the drug at least a year and only 10% for three months or less. There was no current multiple drug use reported.

Thai friends were listed as the most common source suggesting first use of the drug, but 11% of the women indicated that an American friend was the agent first suggesting drug use. As will be seen later this drug was probably marijuana.

Self report of drug use is considerably lower than that reportedly alleged to others (See Table 2). Almost 60% of the women indicated there were many drug users in the area. The definition of "many" was left up to the respondents. Marijuana and barbiturate use account for 90% of the drugs reported used by "other" people, with some heroin use. Surprisingly, alcohol is reported used by only 1% of respondents. Thus, results in Table 1 appear inconsistent with those of Table 2. It is possible that although many individuals report daily alcohol use, they are not intoxicated and therefore are not viewed as "drug users" despite the definition furnished to the respondents.

It is apparent that the women are aware of the use of drugs, as 30% report over half of their friends use some drug daily. One might argue that drug use by a few people could be a "high visibility" phenomenon and the low self use but high "other people" use reported is possibly explained by this (i.e., many people view the same few drug users). The authors feel that this is better explained as a deliberate attempt by individuals to conceal illegal behavior. During the time of this study there were several rumors predicting police action to suppress drug use. In addition, heroin was reported used by "others" but not by the individual respondents. Several women, although obviously intoxicated on a sedative-like drug during the interview, denied drug use. When faced with this fact, they admitted to barbiturate use. Informal observation of this population by the authors also suggests that many more women used sedative-like drugs than the number reported here. Other indirect evidence to corroborate this (such as deaths, hospital admissions for overdose, etc.), are lacking. A surprising 70% of the women indicated having a steady American boyfriend. This is unusual in that there should then be little reason to seek weekly V.D. checks. This could be explained as: a) exaggeration, as having a steady boyfriend carries more status, b) a matter of convenience, as some of the local night clubs required a current V.D. check for entrance, or c) since not all women who reported having a steady boyfriend actually lived with him, this may reflect mistrust on the part of the American who requires the respondent to be checked.

From Table 3 it is apparent that many boyfriends use drugs, according to respondent report. Marijuana accounts for over 60% of this drug use. Relatively few Americans are reported to use some drug without also using marijuana. This is consistent with many other studies of drug use which report most drug users have used marijuana.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Table 3 is the low drug use reported for current boyfriends vs previous boyfriends. This could be due to making comparisons between cumulative past experience and current point incidence, or it might be an attempt to hide illegal behavior of the present boyfriend. It is certainly to the women's best advantage to not disclose this information. About 1/3 of this American drug-taking is alleged to occur daily.

The questions presented in Table 4 were included to offer information on possible influences from one population on drug use of the other. Few Thai women report encouraging drug use by Americans; most women view these efforts as fruitless. Since replacement of a girl friend is a simple matter, it should be expected that about the only method utilized to influence American drug use was to ask him to stop using drugs. Few women refused sex or refused to buy drugs for the boyfriend. Table 4 also indicates that 48% of women report that their American boyfriend has encouraged drug use. This is probably consistent with the earlier statement that in many cases an American introduced drug use. Although 71% of the women indicate they do not follow the suggestion, 29% sometimes do. Eighty-seven per cent of the time the drug use encouraged concerns marijuana. This may indicate that there is some influence by one population on drug use of the other. The results presented here, if valid, would seem to indicate the effect is primarily to increase marijuana use by the Thai women.

The authors are uncertain as to how to interpret these results. As is apparent from the earlier discussion (e.g., comparison of Tables 1 and 2, and information within Table 3), there is evidence that the women are not reporting their own drug use honestly. The examining nurses also noted a consistent posture of lack of interest in the latter part of many of the interviews. This suggests that a different research strategy should be employed to collect valid drug use data from this population. This could be: a) an anonymous, self-administered questionnaire (probably impractical), b) case study of a relatively small number of women (to establish better rapport, and to include more personal observation) or c) limiting questions to recent behavior (but not present) or to "what are others doing?"

It is apparent, however, that these women represent a population which is "high risk" for drug use. This is based both on self report (which is probably too low) and inference based on what "other people" allegedly use. It seems that this population is one which could benefit from government efforts to prevent drug use. But since prostitution is illegal, as well as drug use, any outreach program directed at this population would face many problems.

Table 1.
Description of Drug Use for those 82 Subjects
Reporting Current Drug Use

Drugs Used	Duration of Drug Use	First Use Suggested by
Alcohol 49% (40)	More than 1 yr. 43%(35)	Thai friend 49% (40)
Marijuana 22% (18)	About 1 yr. 16%(13)	Drug store 16%(13)
Barbiturate 12% (10)	More than 3 mths. 32%(26)	Amer. friend 11% (9)
Amphetamine 9% (7)	Less than 3 mths. 10%(8)	Other source 24%(20)
Other combinations 8% (7)		

Table 2.
Perceived Drug Use of Others as Reported by Respondents

Are there many people who use drugs everyday around ?	Drugs reported used	How many of your friends use drugs everyday ?
Yes 59% (293)	Marijuana and barbiturate 51% (148)	Over half 31% (153)
No 24% (120)	Marijuana 28% (82)	Some 17% (84)
Can't say 16% (80)	Barbiturate 12% (33)	None 6% (31)
	Heroin & MJ or Barbiturate 7% (19)	Don't know 46% (225)
	Heroin 1% (3)	
	Alcohol 1% (2)	
	Amphetamine 1% (2)	

Table 3.
Drug Use by Respondents' American Partners

	Does Boyfriend Use ?	Drugs Used	How Often
Previous			
Yes	42% (208)	Marijuana 65% (135)	
No	58% (289)	Marijuana plus some other drugs 21% (44)	
		Amphetamine 3% (5)	
		Heroin 3% (5)	
		Barbiturate 2% (4)	
		Alcohol 1% (2)	
		Other combinations 6% (13)	
Present			
Yes	19% (92)	Marijuana 62% (57)	
No	81% (405)	Marijuana plus some other drugs 19% (17)	Daily 36% (33)
		Heroin 9% (8)	More than once/wk 3% (3)
		Alcohol 4% (4)	Don't know 48% (45)
		Barbiturate 3% (3)	Refuse answer 12% (11)

Table 4.
Attitudes and Influences Relating to Drug Use

	Encourage American Boyfriends to Use Drugs ?	Try to Stop Them ?	Does He Follow Suggestion ?	Does American Encourage You ?	Do You Follow Suggestion ?
Yes	2% (10)	52% (259)	6% (17)	48% (238)	3% (6)
No	98% (483)	48% (234)	75% (194)	52% (254)	71% (168)
Sometimes			17% (44)		27% (64)
Don't know			2% (4)		