

A Survey of Thai Student Drug Use

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OBJECTIVE: To determine the prevalence of illicit drug use as reported by a sample of Thai students,

BACKGROUND: There currently exist no empirical data on the prevalence or incidence of drug abuse in Thailand, although some informal estimates are available. In 1972, 300,000 individuals were estimated to be addicted to drugs (1). The Director of one of Bangkok's two drug rehabilitation programs indicates that 200 students seek assistance every day for drug abuse (2), although this includes users of some "soft" drugs and individuals who have appeared more than one time. In 1973, it was estimated (3) that 300,000 students were addicted to drugs. It was also estimated that more than half of the country's 43,000 prisoners are addicted to narcotic drugs (4). There have been no formal surveys of drug use by a Thai student population.

DESCRIPTION: One thousand six hundred and thirteen students were surveyed. These attended schools in the Chiang Mai and Nakorn Rajsima provinces and one school in Bangkok. Classrooms from schools in Chiang Mai and Nakorn Rajsima provinces were selected by a stratified random sampling procedure to give proportional representation of students by grade, kind of school and type of specialization. The grade levels surveyed were MS 3, 4, 5 and technical college, years 1-4. Students were randomly drawn from selected classrooms to give proportional representation by sex. An additional 304 students (50% of total enrolment selected at random) from the Demonstration School under the Chulalongkorn Teacher's Training Faculty in Bangkok were also surveyed. These were students in grades MS2-5. The average age of all students was 16.9, range 13-25.

A series of 15 pairs of questions included in the questionnaire were designed so that students could respond in a mutually exclusive (i.e., inconsistent) manner. These question pairs were used to evaluate consistency of students' responses. Any student who responded inconsistently on four or more pairs of these questions was eliminated from the study. One hundred and six students were eliminated for this reason along with one additional student who failed to complete his questionnaire. Data reported here are based on responses from 1506 students from Chiang Mai, Nakorn Rajsima and Bangkok who provided complete and consistent questionnaires.

RESULTS: To facilitate discussion results will usually be presented by comparing two kinds of subjects. The first kind is labelled "drug user." These are students who reported ever having used an illicit drug. The second kind is labelled "non-user." These are students who reported never having used any illicit drug. Alcohol and tobacco are not considered illicit drugs in Thailand. All entries in the tables are percentages.

Twenty-three percent (23%) of all students indicated "ever use" of an illicit drug. Six percent (6%) of all students indicated that they are currently using an illicit drug. The average ages were 17.9 (range 13-23) and 16.6 (range 13-25) years for the drug user and non-user, respectively.

Table 1, 2 and 3 indicate the following: Males are more likely to report using drugs than females and drug users are relatively less likely to be living with parents. The latter finding is due to the higher age of drug users, who are at greater risk of living away from home. Parents of drug users are more likely to smoke tobacco or drink alcoholic beverages. Table 4 presents frequency of reported drug use by drug type. Students who report "ever use" of an illicit drug also report more frequent use of tobacco and

alcohol. Marijuana is the illicit drug most frequently reported used. Table 5 indicates that drug users are more likely to report involvement with police and Table 6 indicates they are more likely to have had sexual intercourse. Differences reported in Tables 5 and 6 cannot be attributed to the higher age of drug users, as they were maintained when users and non-users were compared within each age level. Table 7 indicates that drug users report receiving somewhat less love and supervision from parents than peers received. Table 8 indicates that most drug users report getting their drugs from a friend or acquaintance rather than by self-purchase.

Table 9 indicates that about one fourth of drug users were "self-initiates" into drug use, and about half indicate that a friend or acquaintance first introduced them to drug use. Table 10 indicates that drug users are more likely to have close friends using drugs, and Table 11 indicates that drug users are also more likely to report that their acquaintances are using drugs. About 65% of users and half of non-users indicate that at least some of their acquaintances are using illicit drugs. Table 12 provides estimates of other students' drug use. Users estimate slightly greater numbers of students are using drugs than non-users estimate. About 75% of all students report that at least some students are using illicit drugs. Table 13 indicates that drug users are more likely to turn to friends and non-users to parents when they seek help for personal problems. Few individuals selected teachers as a first choice for this kind of help. Table 14 indicates that about one-fourth of all students do not wish to learn more about drugs, but about half of all students do. At the same time users are more likely to report that they know enough about drugs.

To the statements in Table 15 individuals were allowed to select up to two "sources of information about drugs." Users receive information from school, friends, and to some extent the mass media (TV, radio, newspapers); non-users are more likely to receive information from school or the mass media. Table 16 is based on responses from non-users only. Individuals were allowed to select up to two of the reasons for not using drugs listed. Fifty-one percent (51%) of individuals selected "not interested" as one of their first two reasons for non-use and 61% selected "risk of physical damage" as one of their first two reasons for not using illicit drugs. Few individuals selected other reasons.

DISCUSSION: We present results based on those questions felt to be most appropriate for the purposes of this paper, thus responses to all 49 questions are not presented. Reporting of drug use is sex related in Thailand with 94% of the users being male while 76% of the total student body surveyed is male. This may be typical of results found when drug use is just beginning to become widespread and has not yet been readily adopted by the female student.

Drug users are less likely to be living with their parents or a relative. This is a reflection of the fact that heaviest drug use occurred among technical school (vocational) students living in dormitories not under the direct influence of their parents. It is not primarily the result of broken homes.

There is a weak relationship between reported drug use and use of alcohol and tobacco by parents. Users are more likely to come from a family where one or both parents utilized these licit drugs. Blum (5) has attributed this to a learned orientation toward drug use. There is, however, virtually no illicit drug use, according to student report, by parents of either the drug users or non-users.

It is clear from Table 4 that users smoke a great deal more tobacco products, and in addition consume more alcoholic beverages than non-users. This is a typical finding in surveys of drug use, and points up one difficulty of controlling illicit drug use; the drug user not only uses illicit drugs, but has established a pattern of heavy use of legal psychoactive drugs. This orientation to several kinds of drugs which alter the individuals' consciousness makes the behavior especially difficult to extinguish. Perhaps intervention at a very young age, even before alcohol and tobacco are first used (by age 13 in this survey), is called for. Twenty percent (20%) of students indicated "ever use" of marijuana with 5% of students indicating current use. Some experimentation with other illicit drugs is reported but little current use. Thus, it may well be that the student population studied here has not yet been infected with the problem of widespread illicit drug use.

Table 1. Sex and Drug Use

Subject	Sex	
	Male	Female
User (n = 359)	94%	6%
Non-User (n = 1147)	70%	30%
Combined (n = 1506)	76%	24%

Table 2. Place of Living and Drug Use

Subject	Place		
	With both parents	With relative	Other
User (n = 359)	61%	21%	18%
Non-User (n = 1147)	67%	18%	15%

Table 3. Parental Use of Tobacco and Alcohol

Subject	Tobacco		Alcohol	
	How many parents use:		How many parents use:	
	At least one	Neither	At least one	Neither
User (n = 359)	78%	22%	65%	35%
Non-User (n = 1147)	64%	36%	48%	52%

Table 4. Frequency of Reported Drug Use¹

Drug Type	Frequency of Use						
	never	used but stopped	<1 time/month	<1 time/week	1-3 days/week	4-6 days/week	daily
alcohol ² user (<u>n</u> = 359)	15	32	30	17	5	1	1
non-user (<u>n</u> = 1147)	70	19	8	3	0	0	0
tobacco ² user (<u>n</u> = 359)	9	26	5	6	10	5	38
non-user (<u>n</u> = 1147)	65	21	4	3	2	1	3
amphetamines (<u>n</u> = 1506)	98	1	0	1	0	0	0
barbiturates combined (<u>n</u> = 1506)	96	3	1	0	0	0	0
hallucinogens (<u>n</u> = 1506)	99	1	0	0	0	0	0
marijuana (<u>n</u> = 1506)	79	16	2	1	1	0	1
opiates (<u>n</u> = 1506)	99	1	0	0	0	0	0
others (<u>n</u> = 1506)	99	1	0	0	0	0	0

¹ All values are per cents; due to rounding errors, row totals may not equal 100 %.

² These per cent values are of the total student population (n = 1506).

Table 5. Involvement with Police after Age 13

Subject	Number of Incidents		
	Never	One time	More than once
User (<u>n</u> = 359)	81 %	12 %	7 %
Non-User (<u>n</u> = 1147)	94 %	4 %	2 %

Table 6. Experience with Sexual Intercourse

Subject	Experience	
	None	Some
User ($n = 359$)	41 %	59 %
Non-User ($n = 1147$)	87 %	13 %

Table 7. View of Parental Love and Supervision after Age 13

Subject	Love Received from Parents			Supervision Received from Parents		
	more than peers	same as peers	less than peers	more than peers	same as peers	less than peers
User ($n = 359$)	25 %	63 %	10 %	28 %	50 %	21 %
Non-User ($n = 1147$)	33 %	59 %	4 %	41 %	49 %	6 %

Table 8. Method of Drug Acquisition

Source	Per Cent
buying ¹	21
friends give	50
acquaintance give	9
other	5
no answer	15

¹ Only two per cent of these report illegal activity to provide money for purchase.

Table 9. Source Suggesting First Use of Illicit Drugs

Source	Per Cent
self	25
neighborhood friend	12
school friend	25
acquaintance	14
other	6
no answer	18

Table 10. Drug Use by Close Friends at Home and School

Subject	Friends from Neighborhood			Friends from School		
	no close friends or none use	at least one uses	no answer	no close friends or none use	at least one uses	no answer
user ($\underline{n} = 359$)	45 %	25 %	30 %	54 %	27 %	19 %
non-user ($\underline{n} = 1147$)	63 %	9 %	28 %	80 %	7 %	13 %

Table 11. Estimate of Acquaintances' Drug Use

Subject	Percent of Acquaintances Estimated to be Using Illicit Drugs					
	1-20 %	21-50 %	51-70 %	> 70 %	some but can't say	none or don't know
user ($\underline{n} = 359$)	13	2	2	1	46	35
non-user ($\underline{n} = 1147$)	9	1	0	0	38	51

Table 12. Estimate of other Students' Drug Use

Subject	Percent of other Students Estimated to be Using Illicit Drugs					
	<5 %	5-10 %	11-20 %	21-50 %	> 50 %	some but can't say
user (<u>n</u> = 359)	21	12	7	5	4	49
non-user (<u>n</u> = 1147)	25	7	4	2	1	60

Table 13. Source of Help for Personal Problems

Subject	Source from which Students Seek Help				
	parents	friends	teacher	other	no answer
User (<u>n</u> = 359)	32 %	57 %	3 %	6 %	2 %
Non-User (<u>n</u> = 1147)	62 %	24 %	3 %	5 %	1 %

Table 14. Desire to Learn more about Drugs of Abuse

Subject	Expressed Desire			
	know enough	don't wish to learn more	do wish to learn more	no answer
User (<u>n</u> = 359)	19 %	21 %	42 %	18 %
Non-User (<u>n</u> = 1147)	8 %	23 %	53 %	17 %

Table 15. Source of Information Concerning Drugs

Subject	Source Selected as One of First Two Choices							
	none	home	school	friend	TV radio	news- paper	drug store or doctor	other
User ($n = 359$)	2 %	10 %	50 %	50 %	12 %	23 %	14 %	8 %
Non-User ($n = 1147$)	13 %	11 %	69 %	19 %	18 %	30 %	14 %	3 %

Table 16. Why Non-Users Choose Not to Use Drugs

Reason	Per Cent Selecting as First or Second Choice
not interested	53
don't know where to buy	3
parents' influence	8
friends' influence	1
risks of legal problems	5
religious	4
risk of physical or mental damage	61
other	5

As is typically found, drug users are more likely to have been involved with illegal activities brought to the attention of the police. It is important to note, however, that only a minority of drug users (19% vs 6% for non-users) actually had such involvement. Thus, it would be an error to characterize the user as a "criminal." Also, drug use is not a "lower-class" phenomenon. Table 6 indicates that drug users are more likely to have had sexual intercourse.

Drug users report receiving less love and supervision from parents than non-using peers receive from parents. The implications of this may be that in at least some cases disturbed home life has been a factor contributing to drug usage. Whether these are real differences or merely those that are perceived by the drug user is not clear. It may reflect the importance of providing affection and supervision to children as a means to help establish maximum internalization of parental and societal norms. At the least parents must be involved with any drug prevention program, perhaps by pointing out the parents' role in the genesis of many behavioral problems (including drug use).

Involvement with drugs is a social phenomenon (5,6) often spread through relationships established within specific social networks. Thus, it is not surprising that Tables 8 and 9 indicate that "friends" are the primary agent reported as suggesting first use of illicit drugs. The drug use reported in this paper could be described as social or "experimental", a kind of drug use for which social rewards (peer acceptance, status, etc.) could well provide the primary impetus for continuation. Prevention programs would probably gain most if they emphasized the role of "friends" in the spread of drug use, and relied heavily on students as transmitters of education materials. Almost no illegal activity was reported to gain money for financing of respondents' drug use, as only 2% of those reporting using illicit drugs indicated illegal activity was involved to get money to buy those drugs. As little use of addicting drugs is reported, this result is not unexpected.

As expected drug users are more likely (although the differences are not large) to have friends who use drugs. Friends who use drugs are equally likely to be reported (by both non-users and users) as coming from a home neighborhood as from a school. This fact may indicate that any drug prevention program which is administered solely through school systems would not have maximum impact. Thus, if these "friends" from the neighborhood are not students then other methods must be utilized to reach them. These other methods presumably would be through the mass media, preferably newspapers.

Surprisingly, users' and non-users' estimates of other students' drug use, and of their friends' drug use, did not show large differences. Drug users typically over-estimate the extent of drug usage and non-users under-estimate the extent of drug use. We found 6% of students reporting current use of some illicit drug and an additional 17% reporting ever use of some drugs. Table 11 indicates that both users and non-users have over-estimated the amount of student drug usage (assuming our figures are accurate). That most students are aware that some drugs are being used is indicated by the "some but can't say" column in this table. At least half of all students did indicate that "some" students are using drugs. This is an entirely accurate statement. That the user and non-user did not indicate large differences in amount of friends' drug use may indicate that drug use, or at least frequent use, by a large part of the study population is not occurring. This agrees with the figures presented earlier.

A clear difference was observed between users and non-users as to the source of help for personal problems. Friends are more likely to be sought by the drug users and parents sought by the non-users. The implications of this are: a) Drug education prevention programs might utilize "friends" to help educate other students; and b) because teachers (and other school sources) were selected as a first choice by very few students, the credibility of school authorities as sources of counselling may be very low. This may be an area to improve through teacher education and training.

Table 14 indicates that about half of all students expressed a desire to learn more about drugs. This points to a need for more thorough education programs. These might be directed through schools and at the same time presented through mass media (radio, TV, newspapers). As we see in Table 15 "schools" have been the primary source of information about drugs for most individuals, especially non-users of drugs. Users, however, have also relied greatly on friends and newspapers for information. Drug stores, doctors, parents and other sources apparently do not play a significant role in this kind of education.

Table 16 was based on responses from non-users only. Important reasons for *not* using drugs are "risk of physical or mental damage" and "no interest", no other reason was largely selected for not using drugs. Surprisingly, friends' and parents' influence did not play a major role. The physical and psychological effects of drugs should be emphasized in any education/prevention program; an accurate picture of these effects might serve to deter a significant proportion of individuals from using drugs.

SUMMARY : In a survey of drug use by 1506 Thai students about one-quarter reported using illicit drugs, and six percent (6%) reported current use. This extensive drug experimentation, in addition to alcohol use, indicates a need for active preventive efforts to abort future epidemic drug use in this drug-saturated

environment. We indicate that a desire for drug education is expressed by students, that this should be administered through schools and mass media for maximum impact, and should stress physiological and psychological effects of drug use.

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