

Drug abuse among youth on the rise

Total arrests fall, but two-thirds of new abusers nabbed are below 30

By DANSON CHEONG

MORE young people are getting hooked on drugs even as the drug situation here shows signs of improving.

According to latest statistics from the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB), there were 3,085 drug abusers arrested last year, 14 per cent fewer than the 3,581 in 2013.

The value of drugs seized also declined dramatically - amounting to \$8.14 million last year compared to more than \$20 million the year before.

But despite the decrease, two-thirds of the 1,058 new abusers arrested were below the age of 30. Five years ago, this group made up only about half of the number of new abusers.

The CNB highlighted this growing problem in a statement yesterday. "More of our young people are trying drugs," said its director Ng Ser Song.

The data tallies with what some voluntary welfare organisations here are noticing - that abusers are starting to experiment with drugs

at a younger age.

"Even as recently as two years ago, we would see some abusers at 15 or 16 years old. Now we are seeing them as young as 13 or 14," said Dr Carol Balhetchet, senior director for youth services at the Singapore Children's Society.

Dr Balhetchet said this was probably because information on drugs and where to get them is readily available on the Internet.

"Then their peers talk about it and encourage them to experiment," she said.

Senior Minister of State for Home Affairs Masagos Zulkifli said methamphetamine or "Ice" is being pitched to young people by pushers as a drug that is hard to detect and is benign.

"Ice has been marketed to our young... as beneficial (to their needs), to stay slim, study long hours and so forth," said Mr Masagos, who chairs a multi-agency task force tackling growing drug abuse among youth.

But methamphetamine abuse can cause severe psychoses. Long-term use can also cause

brain damage. It was the drug of choice for new abusers last year - with 69 per cent addicted to it.

And despite the amount of methamphetamine seized dropping by about 72 per cent, the authorities found more of it being set aside for the local market - just over 9kg of the 12.41kg seized, enough to sustain 1,200 abusers for a month.

Methamphetamine and heroin abusers made up 92 per cent of the arrests last year.

This is also the first year that New Psychoactive Substances - a range of synthetic drugs which include "bath salts" and "meow meow", a popular alternative to ecstasy - have been included in the annual release, with 470 tablets and 114.36g of the drugs seized.

Mr Vikram Nair, who sits on the Government Parliamentary Committee for Home Affairs and Law, said tough enforcement must continue. "The CNB needs to keep tabs on schools and reach out to places where the youth are at. Family service centres should continue to reach out to at-risk youth and keep them from falling into bad habits because of bad company," said Mr Nair, an MP for Sembawang GRC.

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