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Despite a Crackdown, Use of Illegal Drugs in China Continues Unabated

By DAN LEVIN JAN. 24, 2015



A drug seizure in Guangdong Province. China Stringer Network/Reuters

BEIJING — Despite the crowds and the risk of arrest, the African man standing outside an Adidas outlet here one recent wintry evening was brazen in his pitch.

“Hey man, you want to smoke something?” he asked a passer-by, before offering his wares: cocaine, ecstasy and crystal methamphetamine, all highly illegal in [China](#).

The man was but one of several drug dealers who are a fixture in Sanlitun, one of Beijing's diplomatic districts, just down the block from a police station. Their presence would seem to defy the Chinese government's ambitious claims of a six-month crackdown on drugs that is underway in 108 cities.

Last week, the Ministry of Public Security announced that the Chinese police had arrested 60,500 suspects on drug offenses and seized more than 11 metric tons of narcotics since the latest operation, called "Ban drugs in hundreds of cities," began in October, according to the Xinhua state news agency. Around 180,000 drug users had been punished by mid-December, including more than 55,000 sent to government-run rehabilitation centers, Xinhua said.



Jaycee Chan, the son of Jackie Chan, was imprisoned for drug offenses.

Yan Naiyi/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

But for all the reported successes of China's expanding antidrug campaigns — which last year included the arrest of celebrities like the son of the movie star Jackie Chan and the burning of 400 tons of methamphetamine ingredients — some analysts question whether the police are winning significant, lasting victories in what the authorities have called a "people's war."

China's growing prosperity has turned recreational drug use into an \$82 billion annual domestic business, according to the National Narcotics Control Commission. There are 2.76 million drug users

registered with the Chinese government, three-quarters of them under 35. Yet even the police admit that such figures convey only a fraction of the drug problem. In October, Liu Yuejin, director general of the government's anti-narcotics division, estimated the actual number of addicts at roughly 13 million, half of whom are suspected of using methamphetamine, up from nine percent of addicts who were suspected of using that drug in 2008.

"China is facing a grim task in curbing synthetic drugs, including 'ice,' which more and more of China's drug addicts tend to use," he said, using the street name for crystal methamphetamine, according to the state-run China Daily newspaper. China has some of the world's harshest drug laws: those caught trafficking large amounts of drugs can face the death penalty, and the police have the authority to send casual drug users to compulsory drug rehabilitation centers, which human rights groups say are little more than labor camps.

Although heroin is the most commonly used illegal drug among rural Chinese, the country's booming cities have become major markets for methamphetamine. A study of sewage in four megacities, published last year in the international journal *Science of the Total Environment*, reported that meth was omnipresent in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In Beijing, the greatest concentration was found at a treatment plant serving the city's highest density of nightclubs and bars, while China's wealthy coastal cities in the south were determined to have the highest total consumption of meth, cocaine, ecstasy and ketamine, according to the study.

Drug use also spans the breadth of Chinese society. In December, 41 government officials in the southeastern province of Yunnan were expelled from the Communist Party after failing drug tests. A few months earlier, a 17-year-old girl in the southern province of Jiangxi posted photos on social media of herself and friends snorting ketamine at a nightclub in the province of Jiangxi. She was detained.

Perhaps the most shocking example of China's huge drug trade exploded into the public consciousness in December 2013, when 3,000 paramilitary police officers raided a small village on the coast of Guangdong Province and arrested 182 people, including the former party secretary and 13 other officials. Nearly three tons of meth were seized from the village. "Meth is popular because any illegal lab or factory in the mainland can make it," said Lu Lin, the director of the China Medical Dependency Research Institute at Peking University in

Beijing.

Some of the key ingredients in meth are derived from the herb ephedra sinica, known as ma huang in Mandarin, a staple of traditional Chinese medicine used for treating colds and coughs. Experts say much of the country's meth is produced in southern China, though the authorities prefer to blame Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar and Laos. Consistently absent from their accusations is North Korea, a close ally that some experts believe churns out vast quantities of meth trafficked into China's northeast.

For years, Beijing residents have wondered how dealers were able to sell their wares so openly near a police station in the Sanlitun district, home to many embassies, bars, and restaurants popular with expatriates. A crackdown scattered the men last spring, but during a recent stroll through the neighborhood, it was clear they have not gone far.

Sun Zhongwei, a former narcotics officer turned lawyer, dismissed the suggestion that the dealers were officially tolerated. "If Chinese police had spotted them, they'd have been arrested," he said. "It's impossible for the police to see them and not act upon it. That would be considered an act of negligence."

But drug users in China say the police operate in a bureaucracy programmed to follow orders from above. In some cities, the police allow dealers to operate undisturbed — until they need to fill a quota, according to He Mukun, a former addict and drug counselor in Yunnan. Mr. He said the police in Yunan rarely arrested drug dealers, preferring to use them as informants during crackdowns. "The police think, 'In the future, when my boss gives me an assignment to catch drug users, what happens if I can't find any?' " he said. "But if a cop knows a drug seller, he can just ask for a bunch of names. You get huge numbers that way."

Indeed, the eye-popping statistics from the Ministry of Public Security appear intended to impress: In a five-month crackdown last year, the police were said to have "totally uncovered" 50,827 drug cases, arrested 56,989 suspects and seized 26.5 tons of drugs, an increase in seizures of 126.8 percent over the same period a year earlier.

Despite those numbers, the nation's drug problem continues unabated. On Tuesday, the Chinese government for the first time acknowledged the existence of performance goals in law enforcement. According to

Xinhua, the party’s Political and Legal Affairs Committee demanded that officials “firmly abolish” quotas.

As for drug traffickers higher up the chain, Mr. He, the drug counselor, suggested that some were politically connected and, thus, protected. “The police usually can’t touch them,” he said.

But in an interview, one Beijing dealer said things were changing. “Before, because of our connections, we would always be alerted a few months ahead of a crackdown,” said the dealer, who asked not to be identified. “Now they just happen.”

Chen Jiehao and Becky Davis contributed research.

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