

## Drug Addiction — Current Trends

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### Introduction

This paper presents the current prevalence of drug addiction in Malaysia. It endeavours to obtain an overall picture of the extent and trends of drug abuse, based on statistics obtained from the Anti-Dadah (or Anti-Drug) Task Force, National Security Council, Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia.

Drug addiction is spreading alarmingly and rapidly, particularly among our youth today. The global situation of drug abuse is far from encouraging, with heroin being the main drug of abuse in Southeast Asia and Europe. The problem is becoming increasingly serious in Malaysia because of the country's proximity to drug producing areas, called the "Golden Triangle" which comprises the borders of Thailand, Burma and Laos. Its geographical location, infrastructure and a modern means of communication have enabled traffickers to distribute illicit drugs over an ever widening area. This region is one of the biggest producers of illicit opiates producing an amount estimated to be 600–700 tonnes of opium annually. A wide part of this region is beyond effective government control. A large quantity of heroin also finds its way into Malaysia for trans-shipment and distribution. As a consequence, drug trafficking poses a threat to the stability of many neighbouring countries and affects interstate relations.

### Statistics and Trends

As an indicator of this rapid spread of drug addiction in this country, there were only 711 estimated drug addicts identified in 1970. To further emphasize the epidemic nature of drug addiction, current statistics have shown that this figure has grown alarmingly to 110,363 addicts within a short span of 15 years.<sup>2</sup> See table 1. The states which have a high population of drug addicts are Penang, the Federal Territory, Johore and Selangor. It is more of an urban than a rural problem where an increasing pace of development and industrialisation together with migration from the rural areas make such areas conducive to crime and drug abuse. However, the drug problem seems to be slowly infiltrating into the rural areas. This phenomenon is found in other Asian countries as well, like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, India and Pakistan which are also experiencing the recent spread of heroin abuse from the urban to the rural areas.

Drug addiction is mainly a problem among the youth. Countries in Asia and Malaysia are disturbed by the declining age of drug abusers. Indonesia reported that more than 90% of the victims of drug abuse are young people from the upper as well as the lower stratas of society. In Malaysia, it was revealed that 63% were in the 20–29 age group and 11% were below 19 years.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it was also revealed that 63% of the drug addicts started their drug taking behaviour while they were between 15–24 years. About 23% started at the age-group of 15–19 years, as shown in Table 2. The vulnerable age is not in the

**Table 1**  
*Number of Malaysian Addicts Identified, 1980 – 1985*<sup>12</sup>

State	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
Penang	423	708	877	1229	1378	566	5181
Perak	1192	2188	3776	3881	1630	1117	13784
Fed. Territory	1424	1745	1724	1640	3366	1157	11056
Selangor	1025	1098	1802	1803	1090	322	7140
Johore	1073	1426	1935	1817	1056	284	7591
Kedah/Perlis	216	534	276	499	455	407	2381
Negeri Sembilan	246	303	319	363	395	224	1850
Pahang	907	1330	1658	1839	1129	1218	88135
Malacca	175	424	396	540	439	345	2319
Kelantan	127	210	333	422	532	176	1800
Trengganu	179	261	182	365	317	243	1547
Sarawak	18	45	55	64	29	2	213
Sabah	149	119	30	108	99	58	563
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>7154</b>	<b>10391</b>	<b>13363</b>	<b>14624</b>	<b>11915</b>	<b>6119+</b> 19*	<b>63585</b>

Note: 1970 – 1979                      46778 drug addicts  
 Grand Total                            110363 drug addicts

\*Unaccounted for by state (19)

twenties but in the teens, a stage where they are easily influenced by undesirable elements.

Various psycho-sociological factors may explain the spread of drug addiction in societies undergoing rapid changes. The clash between a traditional culture and the necessities of modernisation, rebellion against conventional social attitudes and values with regards to success and status, weakening of family ties resulting from painful conflicts between parents and children, problems arising from difficult school-family relationships, and discredit of the father-mother image are some of the factors which produce a feeling of internal void and insecurity in the youth. As a means of escape and a temporary solution to their emotional problems, they turn to drugs to alleviate the pain of reality and to find gratification in fantasies through the euphoria produced.

An epidemiological pilot study on drug abuse in Malaysia<sup>4</sup> found that drug users among the youth cannot be distinguished from the population of non-drug users in the same age group who are trying to cope with the same developmental and social problems, stemming from various sources: (1) Outside the school (social change, increasing affluence, peer pressure, weaker family ties, industrialisation, rural-to-urban migration, inter-ethnic conflicts, conflicting or changing identity, lack of community resources and facilities for healthy youthful activities) as well as (2) in the school itself (greater emphasis on success in examinations, language difficulties, and acute shortage of available staff time for counselling and guidance).

Age Group	1970 - 1975	1980	1985
9	0.0	0.1	0.0
10 - 14	6.9	1.7	1.4
15 - 19	49.8	29.1	23.5
20 - 24	27.3	37.3	39.3
25 - 29	11.1	18.3	20.7
30 - 34	1.0	6.8	9.3
35 - 39	2.2	3.6	2.4
40 - 44	1.0	1.7	1.2
45 - 49	0.0	0.7	0.6
50 - 54	0.0	0.3	0.3
55 - 59	0.0	0.2	0.2
60 - 64	0.3	0.1	0.1
65	0.3	0.2	0.1

*Table 2:  
Malaysian Drug Dependents -  
Age When First Addicted (%)<sup>12</sup>*

A study carried out in Sri Lanka, found that adolescents whose parents were employed in the Middle East experienced long parental absences from home, a disintegration of traditional family ties and an erosion of parental authority leading to an increased number of addicts among the youth of these newly affluent families.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that certain risk groups are notoriously prone to drug addiction and they include those from homes whose parents are separated or divorced, whose father is long and frequently absent and who have a history of criminality in the family. Abusers are most likely those who are alienated from families, school dropouts, and runaways from home, or in situations where parental controls are relaxed and whose peers are using drugs. The World Health Organisation Expert Committee on Drug Dependence in 1970 concluded that drug dependence may be a gratification to an underlying character disorder in which immediate gratification is sought, in spite of the possibilities of long-term adverse consequences and at a price of immediate surrender of adult responsibilities. Moreover, it may also be a manifestation of delinquent deviant behaviour in which there is a pursuit of personal pleasure with disregard to social convention, so that to some, this is primarily a moral problem.

The drug addiction profile (1970 - 1985) shows that out of 110,363 drug addicts detected, 98% were males as shown in Table 3. Similar trends were also found in other local studies.<sup>7-11</sup> Even though the number of female addicts are low, steps should be taken to avoid an increase of drug abuse incidence on this particular group. The pattern of drugs used which emerges from these statistics is basically the abuse of heroin. Statistics show that 75% are on heroin, 26% admitted to be on cannabis and the rest on morphine, opium and other psychotropics substances.

Year	SEX (%)	
	Male	Female
1970 – 1975	97.6	2.4
1976	98.2	1.8
1977	97.7	2.3
1978	96.8	3.2
1979	97.1	2.9
1980	97.0	3.0
1981	97.3	2.7
1982	97.4	2.6
1983	98.5	1.5
1984	99.1	0.9
1985	98.4	1.6

*Table 3:*  
Malaysian Drugs Dependents –  
Percentage of Drug Addicts by  
Sex (1970–1985)<sup>1,2</sup>

Drugs	Percentage
Tranquilisers	0.5
Sleeping pills	3.5
Methaqualone (mx pills)	0.2
Amphetamines	0.2
L.S.D.	0.1
Cannabis	25.8
Opium	6.9
Morphine	8.7
Heroin	75.1
Others	0.5

*Table 4:*  
Malaysian Drug Dependents – Per-  
centage of Use for the Different  
Drugs (1985)<sup>1,2</sup>

There is a new specie of heroin users who normally start by smoking heroin from their cigarettes, then move onto “Chasing the dragon” (which consists of heating heroin or a mixture of heroin and barbitone, and the subsequent inhaling of the curl of smoke – known as the dragon’s tail – either with a straw or on empty match box) and finally on to intravenous use. Multiple use of drugs is also another manifestation of the widening problems of youth.

With respect to employment, a majority of drug addicts are mainly labourers (54%) and the unemployed (19%). These characteristics also corroborated with one of the findings.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, this may also be a cause of the increase in the crime rate whereby these addicts are ready to do anything for money to procure their drugs. Unemployment and underemployment may either be seen as a cause or as a consequence of the use of drugs.<sup>9</sup>

In summary, the following are the existing trends of drug addiction:

- (a) Young addicts
- (b) Youth of all ethnic groups

(c) Consumption of dangerous drugs such as heroin and other psychotropic substances.

(d) Non-medical use of drugs

Based on the information and statistics presented, we have briefly seen how serious the drug addiction problem is, which has grown from a handful to an estimated total, in the hundreds of thousands. Most of the addicts seem to be young people, and they employ an over expanding variety of drugs. Part of the problem, undeniably, seems to lie in the changing character of our Malaysian youth – more revolutionary and more eager for new adventures. Such a situation has brought about negative implications, not only to the individual and the family, but to society as well as to the nation.

Occupation	Percentage
Student :	
School	0.8
College	0.1
Unemployed	18.9
Labourers	53.9
Shop Assistants/Keepers	7.9
Clerical	1.4
Skilled Labour	2.9
Management/Professionals	0.2
others	14.2

*Table 5:  
Malaysian Drug Dependents – Per-  
centage of Drug Addicts by Occu-  
pation (1985)<sup>1,2</sup>*

Efforts can no longer be limited to merely providing treatment facilities for those who are afflicted. Prevention is the best action to eradicate this menace. As has been emphasized earlier, it is not solely the Government's responsibility to wage this war against drug abuse and addiction. It requires the total involvement of the community for any anti-dadah campaign to be effective and successful.

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<sup>2</sup> Adilah Md Din. Kedudukan Masalah Dadah di Malaysia/Profil Penagihan Dadah. Paper presented at the *Seminar on Parents' Role in the Prevention of Drug Abuse*, 26–27 October Kuala Lumpur, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> Anti-Dadah Task Force, National Security Council, Prime Minister's Department, Kuala Lumpur, Document No: 2/10/87A, PPAD(R) 133/7-4/1 KLT. 10, 31 December 1986, pages 2, 4, 7 & 8.

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  - <sup>12</sup> Adapted from Adilah Md. Din, Anti-Dadah Task Force, National Security Council Prime Minister's Department, Kuala Lumpur, 1985.