



JAPAN AND ILLICIT DRUGS: A NEGLECTED SUCCESS STORY

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While having witnessed three so-called epidemics in its postwar history, the prevalence of drug abuse in Japan is in fact remarkably low compared to most other countries and constitutes a relatively unknown success story, one which could provide instructive lessons for other countries and anti-drug authorities to learn from.

From being the most technologically advanced country in Asia, boasting international brands, to its popular culture and cuisine, among other achievements, Japan is a country that stands out in many areas. Less well known, however, is Japan's remarkably low prevalence of illicit drug abuse. Indeed, the abuse of substances like heroin, cannabis, and cocaine is much lower compared to many other economically developed countries. And while methamphetamine abuse does indeed exist, this also is at a far lower rate than other Western countries. Further, despite witnessing three "epidemics" of drug abuse in its postwar history, the overall trend since the mid-1980s has actually been that of declining levels of illegal substance consumption.

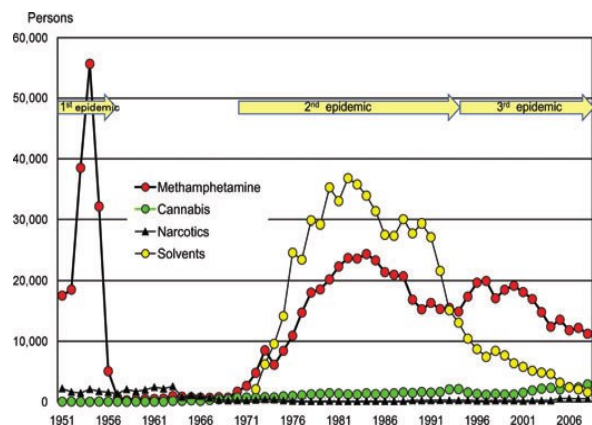
Three "Epidemics"

In the postwar period, as illustrated in Figure 1, Japan has allegedly witnessed three so-called epidemics even though, as will be seen, it is questionable whether their scale warrants the designation of "epidemic," or at least for the most recent one. The figure only depicts the number of drug-related arrests, while the number of actual abusers is, as a matter of fact, higher. A well-known problem is the fact that data for abuse in Japan are hard to come by for the simple reason that abuse is illegal. Furthermore, abusers are not likely to disclose their habit, since taking drugs is heavily stigmatized by the generally law-abiding Japanese society.

In the first epidemic, peaking in 1954, the abused substance in question was methamphetamine, with 55,664 persons being arrested that year. The Ministry of Welfare estimated that 200,000 persons suffered from mental disorders as a result of methamphetamine, 550,000 were abusers, and that over two million had some experience of it. After a comprehensive package of actions against drug

abuse was introduced, this first epidemic was over by 1957.

Fig. 1. Number of drug-related arrests, 1951–2008



Source: Compliance and Narcotics Division, Pharmaceutical and Food Safety Bureau, Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, "The General Situation of Administrative Measures against Narcotics and Stimulants Abuse" (2009).

In the 1970s drug abuse increased again, reaching a peak in 1981, this time with solvent abuse being most widespread, followed by methamphetamine. The latter saw an increase in consumption until around 1985. In 1987, furthermore, the first case of a person receiving treatment for cannabis addiction was registered, followed in 1989 by two cases involving cocaine. One of Japan's most noted drug specialists, Wada Kiyoshi, discussed this new type of abuse and argued that since these cases coincided with a proliferation of abusers taking a mixture of drugs, these cases were of great importance as they reflected the trends and currents of the era.¹ Similarly, Wada discerned a looming national problem, when 96 individuals were arrested for cocaine-related offences in 1989.²

A third "epidemic" is claimed to have begun in 1995.



The basis for declaring the advent of this epidemic was announced in 1998 by the Japanese government’s antidrug agency, The Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse: “In view of the rapidly increasing numbers of junior and senior high school students arrested for stimulant drug related crimes (262 students in 1997, the highest number ever), it is judged that a third period of stimulant drug abuse has arrived.”³ That is, an increase of high-school drug abusers—to 262 individuals—was deemed sufficient for announcing an epidemic.

Although in the first instance (1950s) the scale of abuse can be legitimately considered an epidemic, the history of drug abuse and related arrests in postwar Japan needs to be put in context. First, Japan has a population of over 120 million. The couple of hundred high-school students arrested each year in the mid-1990s constitutes an almost negligible proportion of the country’s population as a whole. Second, while a certain increase of abuse has been noted in some years, the long-term trend has been downwards since the mid-1980s. In fact, by 2008, solvent abuse had almost been totally eradicated, and that of methamphetamine continued to be on the decline; even if, subsequently, a slight increase has been noted.

While there of course exist drug abusers in Japan, their number is rather modest in a comparative perspective. Indeed, as revealed by Figure 1, official statistics show that the abuse of narcotics and cannabis has consistently been close to zero. Notably, the low level of abuse cases is contrary to what has been seen elsewhere, such as the United States and European countries, which is illustrated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Annual prevalence of abuse as percentage of population^o

Country	Ampheta- mines	Opiates	Cocaine	Cannabis
USA	1.6	0.6	3.0	12.2
Canada	1.0	0.3	2.3	17.0
Thailand	0.8	0.5	0.03	0.9
Australia	2.9	0.5	2.0	11.4
Spain	1.0	0.2	3.0	11.2
Denmark	0.7	0.5	1.0	5.2
Germany	0.5	0.3	0.7	4.7
Philippines	6.0	0.05	0.03	4.2
Thailand	0.8	0.1	0.03	0.9
Taiwan	0.6	0.2	0.1	0.5
Japan	0.3	0.06	0.03	0.1

^o Age cohorts are usually 15–64

Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, *World Drug Report 2008*.

Japan as Role Model

During the heyday of Japan’s rapid economic growth, the country became a role model for other countries to emulate. This image has waned after the economic woes that hit Japan from the beginning of the 1990s. The above facts, however, make it obvious that Japan can take pride in its success in the fight against illicit drugs. That Japan has been able to largely avoid the abuse of narcotics and cannabis—and that abuse rates for other substances are also low—should be instructive for anti-drug authorities in other countries to learn what has been done in Japan to counter illicit drug abuse. Accordingly, uncovering the contributing factors behind Japan’s drug success story and how they may be adopted by others should be the focus of further investigation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Wada Kiyoshi, “Yakubutsu ran’yō-izon no rekishi to gen’jō,” in *Yakubutsu izon kenkyū no saizensen*, ed. Katō Shin, Suzuki Tsutomu, Takada Kōji (Tokyo: Seiwa shoten, 1999), pp. 87f.
- ² Wada Kiyoshi, *Izōnsei yakubutsu to ran’yō-izon-chūdoku: Jidai no hazama wo mitsumete* (Tokyo: Seiwa shoten, 2000), p. 22.
- ³ Headquarters for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Drug Abuse, “Five-Year Drug Abuse Prevention Strategy in Japan” (1998), <http://www.kantei.go.jp/foreign/yakubutu/980701yakubutu.html>.

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