

# Japan's War on Drugs

By Toshiki Hirai

There is no universally accepted definition of the term "narcotics," and whether or not a particular substance is classified as a narcotic depends on the country you are in. Some people restrict the term to poppy derivatives such as morphine and heroin, while others include any addictive drug—including stimulants such as amphetamines and hallucinogens such as LSD—whose abuse not only harms the user but has a deleterious impact on his loved ones and society as well.

The abuse of non-narcotic prescription drugs such as barbiturates and tranquilizers, as well as the sniffing of organic solvents such as paint thinner, have also become major social problems. Not only is such abuse a problem in itself, it can lead to the use of harder drugs such as stimulants and narcotics. Thus society's efforts to deal with its narcotics problem has necessarily been broadened to include other substance abuse as well. How widespread is this problem in Japan, and what is Japan doing about it?

## Pattern of abuse

The illegal drugs of choice in Japan are methamphetamine and cannabis (in the form of hashish or marijuana). There is little problem with heroin, cocaine and LSD. While not quite in the same category, the inhalation of paint thinner and other organic solvents has also been a problem in recent years.

There were approximately 22,900 drug-related arrests (out of a population of about 120 million) in Japan in 1987, of which 21,000 were related to stimulants (of which about half were users), another 1,400 were related to cannabis, while other chemicals accounted for the remaining 500.

Separate statistics are kept on the inhalation of solvents, however, now a major problem among Japan's youth. In 1987, about 45,000 people were either arrested or sent for counseling in connection with

solvent inhalation, 80% of whom were juveniles. These Japanese figures show a pattern of drug abuse distinctly different from that in Western Europe or in the rest of Asia.

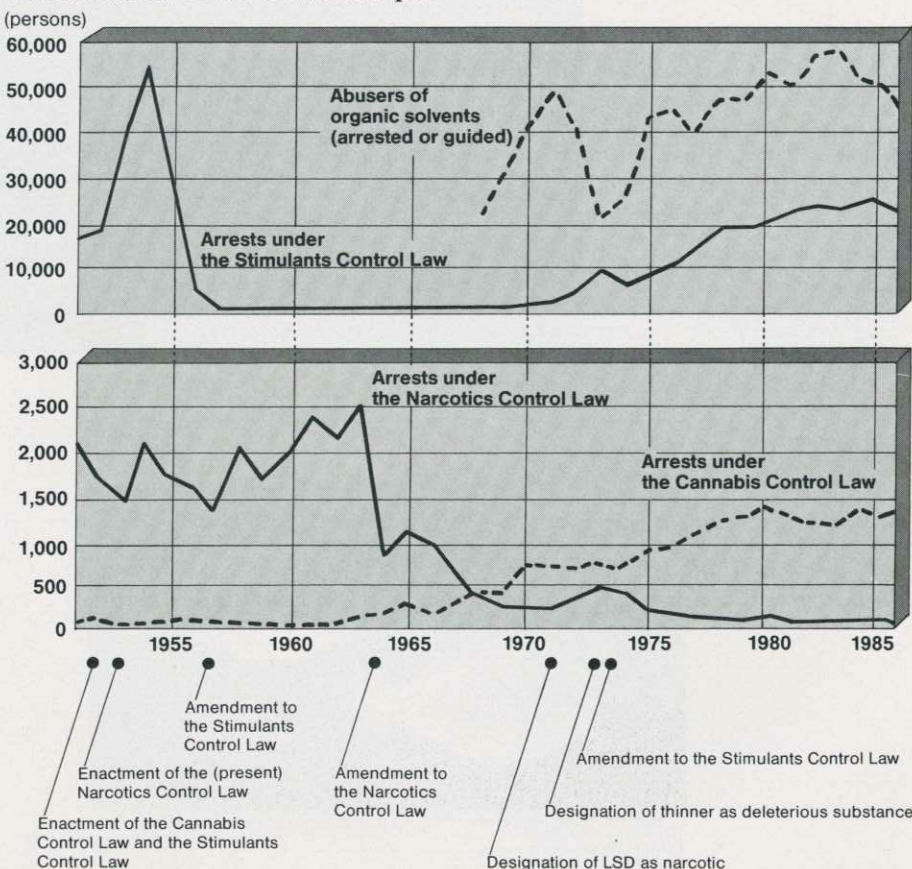
Drug abuse was not a serious social problem in Japan before the end of World War II. Not only had Japan never developed a tradition of using mind-altering drugs such as opium or hemp, but the country's geographical and political isolation kept this custom from spreading to Japan from overseas. Even after self-imposed isolation ended in the late 19th century, the regulations against opium and other narcotics were very harsh.

Japan has undergone three waves of drug abuse since World War II, however. In the immediate postwar confusion, the methamphetamines used by the Japa-

nese Imperial Army found their way onto the open market, and their use spread rapidly among a tired and disillusioned public. The Stimulants Control Law was passed in 1951 to deal with this new problem. In 1955, the penalties were stiffened and the scope of the law was broadened to include the materials used to manufacture the stimulants. In addition, a major drug education program was launched. As a result, stimulant abuse was largely eliminated by 1958.

About the time that stimulant abuse ceased to be a problem, heroin smugglers imported another drug craze. Thus the Narcotics Control Law was revised in 1963 to raise the maximum penalty for offenders to life imprisonment, and to institute compulsory hospitalization and counseling for narcotic addicts. The gov-

## Narcotic and Stimulant Control in Japan





ernment and the public joined forces in a massive campaign to get the word out on the evils of narcotics. Once again, the antidrug efforts were successful, and the abuse of heroin dropped dramatically. As a subsidiary problem, abuse of sleeping pills started to spread among young people in around 1960, but this was nipped in the bud by strengthening the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law.

Since 1970, abuse of speed has once again been on the rise and shows no signs of abating. These stimulants are being manufactured overseas and then smuggled into Japan. Organized crime—the *yakuza*—appears to be involved in both the import and the sale of these drugs.

Typically, about 20–25mg of speed is injected intravenously, a dosage which costs about ¥5,000 (\$40 at the rate of ¥125/\$) on the street. There are also some that can be taken orally. Although the spread of AIDS among intravenous drug users has become a problem in

many countries, this is not yet a problem in Japan—most likely due to the small number of Japanese infected with AIDS to begin with.

## Clamping down

Japan's drug laws are enforced by four separate government entities: the District Narcotics Control Offices, the police, the customs authorities and the Maritime Safety Agency. Within this framework, there are eight District Narcotics Control Offices nationwide employing a total of 170 people. These offices, operating under the Ministry of Health and Welfare, have as their sole purpose the control of illegal drug use.

The police, dealing not only with narcotics but with crimes of all kinds, have a much more extensive organization both in terms of number of people and coverage. Not surprisingly, the police handle the majority of the stimulant-abuse cases as well.

Except for locally grown cannabis, all of the drugs that plague Japan are smuggled into the country, and the customs authorities thus have a major interception role to play. When customs officials discover a shipment of drugs, they normally call on the police for help. Another important agency for blocking the import of narcotics is the Maritime Safety Agency, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Transport.

All of these agencies cooperate to enforce Japanese narcotics laws and to keep Japan relatively drug-free. Morphine, heroin and other opium derivatives; cocaine, pethidine and other synthetic narcotics; and LSD are all dealt with harshly under the Narcotics Control Law. Although LSD is perhaps not technically a narcotic, it is defined as a narcotic to facilitate its control.

The cultivation of poppies and the import of opium are restricted under the Opium Law, and the import, cultivation, sale and possession of cannabis under the Cannabis Control Law.

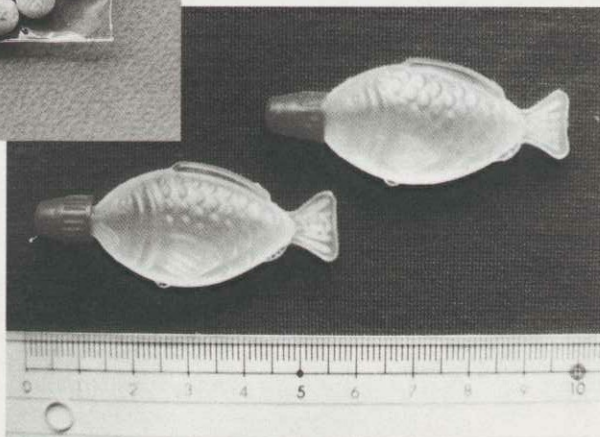
The stimulants amphetamine and methamphetamine are dealt with as strictly as narcotics, if not more so, under the Stimulants Control Law. Eight other related substances, including ephedrine, are classified as raw materials for stimulants and are restricted accordingly.

While the control of non-narcotic sleeping pills and tranquilizer abuse has been generally very successful under the Pharmaceutical Affairs Law, there are plans to step up enforcement by amending a part of the Narcotics Control Law.

In April 1988, the ringleader of a stimulant-smuggling operation was given the maximum sentence—life imprisonment. Users as well as dealers are prosecuted, however, and about half of all drug-related prosecutions in Japan are for simple possession and use.

In 1986, 89.4% of those arrested on suspicion of stimulant-related offenses were brought to trial, and the conviction rate was 98.9%. While some offenders are put on probation, over 60% of those convicted are not, and the tendency is to deal harshly with violators. As noted above, Japanese law punishes both users and dealers, the philosophy being to attack the prob-

Narcotic drugs come in many different forms, and there are many different implements like syringes and containers such as the "gold fish" shown here for use with them.







A poster for an antidrug campaign directed at young people. The main slogan reads "I'll be killed, killed, killed."

lem from both the supply and the demand sides.

In 1970, the government established a special task force within the Prime Minister's Office for promoting and coordinating the various policies for preventing drug abuse. Among the measures it is pushing are strengthened enforcement and stiffer penalties, medical treatment and care for addicts as well as educational campaigns.

Studies indicate that the prime motives for drug abuse are curiosity—a desire for new experiences—and recreation. This seems to imply that many people are still ignorant of the dangers of drug use and argues the need for an extensive, long-term drug-education campaign to make people aware of how destructive drugs can be. In addition to public-service advertising, the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the prefectural governments organize citizens-against-drugs campaigns every year. Pamphlets warning of the dangers of stimulants are distributed to the general public and educational booklets aimed at preventing drug abuse are supplied to junior high schools throughout the nation.

There are also annual campaigns to

prevent the illegal cultivation of poppies and hemp, and 3,420,000 hemp plants and 260,000 poppies growing in the wild were destroyed in 1987.

In January 1987, the Cabinet decided to promote further cooperation with the private sector in preventing drug abuse, and the Narcotics and Stimulant Abuse Prevention Center was established that June with both private and public funding. The main purpose of this center is to disseminate information on the physical and psychological effects of drug abuse, as well as to cooperate with government and business drug-education efforts. The private Japan Crime Prevention Association is also devoting considerable energy to the prevention of drug abuse.

In addition to these efforts, the Stimulant Abuse Prevention Program provides stimulant abuse counseling offices at community health centers throughout Japan, and both the Narcotics Control Offices and prefectural police agencies operate telephone counseling hot lines to discuss drug problems. Among the many areas engaging Japanese researchers' attention are ways to detect past drug use from a single strand of hair and the use of positron emission computerized tomography to analyze how stimulants affect the brain.

## Recent developments

As Japan's relatively high rate of stimulant-related crime has continued unabated, two trends have been noted: an increase in the per-shipment volume of illegal drugs entering the country, and an increase in heroin going through Japan on its way from Southeast Asia to the United States.

In 1988, the first reported use of "crack" in Japan occurred in Okinawa, involving possession of crack intended for personal use that the arrested person had obtained while traveling in the United States. Reflecting the worldwide epidemic of cocaine abuse, Japan is also experiencing an increase in cocaine-related crime.

Japan legally imports some 60 tons of opium from India every year for processing into medical-use morphine, codeine and related drugs. The medical use of he-

roin is not allowed under present law. Most of these opium derivatives are used in cough suppressants such as codeine phosphate or dihydrocodeine phosphate. Cocaine and synthetic narcotics are also used medically, but their sale is severely regulated and it is very rare for these drugs to be diverted to illegal use.

Along with seeking to stamp out drug abuse within its own borders, Japan is also cooperating with international efforts. For example, the Study Program for Asian Drug Abuse and Narcotics Experts was begun in 1986 under the auspices of the Ministry of Health and Welfare, and its most recent gathering in 1988 was a four-week session on administrative control of narcotics, with special attention to education campaigns. The National Police Agency also conducts annual Seminars on the Control of Narcotics Offenses. Japan has donated \$670,000 to the United Nations Fund for Drug Abuse Control, money which is used to encourage poppy-growers to raise other crops and to train law enforcement officials in areas where the drug trade is most concentrated.

Japan's war on drugs may not be front-page news. But the battles are being fought nonetheless.

Finally, a word of warning to visitors to Japan:

A number of preparations that may be legal in other countries contain ingredients falling under either the Stimulants Control Law or the Narcotics Control Law. These products—including the U.S.-made Vicks Inhaler (a cold medication), Lomotil (a diarrhea medication) and Sudafed (an asthma medication)—may not be brought into Japan, even if only for personal use. Visitors to Japan should plan accordingly. When in doubt, leave it out.

Because Japan has very severe penalties for drug-related crimes, including possession, visitors should take every care not to have traces of drugs such as marijuana on their person or in their luggage.

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