

Illegal-drug sales boom from Internet

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The Internet's speed, efficiency and convenience has drastically changed the way people work and play over the past decade, but it also has changed the way the underground world works -- or so the Japanese authorities are discovering to their dismay.

Take the buying and selling of illegal drugs. Use of recreational substances such as heroine and cocaine in Japan is far less than in the United States and many other industrialized nations, but the proliferation of illegal drugs has been rising steadily. According to the government, more than 406 kilograms of drugs were confiscated last year alone.

Moreover, it has become far easier to gain access to the drugs as a result of the Internet, which seems to have proven irresistible to many Japanese in their 20s.

"Even less than 10 years ago, you had to go to specific areas ... like Kabukicho," part of Tokyo's bustling Shinjuku district, to acquire illegal substances, said one man in his early 30s on condition of anonymity.

"You really had to know where exactly to go, and when. Now, if you spend a few minutes online, it's really easy to get access to information about the soft stuff," such as marijuana.

Late last week the Japanese health ministry announced the arrest of at least 60 people over the past seven months for selling illegal drugs over the Internet. Last year only 10 people were arrested.

Government officials said the surge in the number of arrests was largely

due to the establishment last January of a special task force devoted solely to cracking down on online dealings. By setting up offices in eight locations across Japan, the task force was able to bolster its monitoring of activities, including posing as customers and then arresting those who were selling the drugs.

The health ministry said drug dealers post special notices online that potential customers can recognize, and then they can negotiate the quantity and price of the drugs through text-messaging. Ministry officials said most transactions are done anonymously, where the dealer and the buyer never actually meet or even speak directly to each other.

The ministry acknowledged that the convenience and efficiency of the market created by the Internet has expanded the number of people who have become involved in the Japanese drug scene.

Meanwhile, some critics have noted that the police force and other government agencies were slow to recognize the potential of the World Wide Web to be used for criminal activity. They argue that if the authorities had been quicker to understand the downside risks of the Internet and had established a task force such as the one set up a few years ago, then the number of those now involved in illegal drugs could have been kept lower.

For instance, of the 60 people arrested over the past seven months, most had regular jobs and were not part of the Yakuza network, or Japanese mob operation, that hitherto has dominated the illegal-substances market. Among those who were arrested was a practicing physician from Okayama prefecture.

The emergence of the Internet also has led to a surge in sales of drugs that are not approved for sale in Japan but are readily available elsewhere, such as Viagra, the medication for erectile dysfunction.

Although popular worldwide, Viagra has not yet been approved by the Japanese drug authority, something that makes it a prime candidate for illegal online sales.

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