

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland, College Park

***How Does Heroin Spread from Urban to Rural Areas?
New York Study Examines the Geographic Diffusion of Heroin Use***

Over the past 30 years, heroin use has spread from large urban cities to non-metropolitan areas across the United States. This geographic diffusion was the subject of a recent qualitative investigation of heroin distribution into and within non-metropolitan areas of the mid-Hudson region of New York state. Qualitative data was obtained over a period of 19 months from street observations, conversations with street informants, and interviews with 237 drug treatment clients at 28 different drug treatment facilities. Interviews were also conducted with other individuals with knowledge about local drug activities, including street outreach workers, drug counselors, school guidance counselors, narcotics detectives, drug treatment administrators, and local directors of substance abuse services. Following are some of the research findings.

- Heroin prices are lower in New York City and other nearby urban areas (Newark and Paterson, New Jersey) than in the non-metropolitan areas of the mid-Hudson region (\$10 vs. \$20-\$25 per bag). Due to this price disparity, heroin dependent users from the suburbs travel to New York City to buy cheap heroin, then return to the suburbs to sell it at a higher rate to defray the cost of their habits. These dependent street dealers are known as “jugglers.”
- Jugglers actively seek out and sell premium-priced heroin to irregular users in the suburbs who do not have access to cheaper heroin, soliciting users by telephone calls, cruising in cars around town, and situating themselves in public places. This proactive mode of retail heroin distribution contrasts with that of urban areas, where heroin dealers—who typically pride themselves on not using heroin—do not have to seek out buyers because there is a ready street market for the drug.
- Jugglers also recruit new users—and thus promote heroin diffusion—by tricking them into using heroin, most often by misrepresenting it as cocaine.
- Irregular users from the suburbs eventually become regular users and gain access to cheaper heroin, typically through their local juggler’s contacts in urban areas. They then become jugglers themselves, selling premium-priced heroin to support their habits. The process repeats itself, contributing to the diffusion of heroin use within non-metropolitan areas.

The authors conclude that in addition to the need for epidemiological research to establish the prevalence of heroin abuse in non-metropolitan areas, “there is also an equally pressing need to target those irregular users through street outreach intervention and perhaps interdict their efforts to obtain cheaper heroin in urban areas, thereby limiting the potential pool of sellers” (p. 440).

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Furst, R.T., Herrmann, C., Leung, R., Galea, J., Hunt, K. “Heroin Diffusion in the Mid-Hudson Region of New York State,” *Addiction* 99(4):431-441. For more information, contact Professor R. Terry Furst at tfurst3334@aol.com.

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