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Rich vs. Poor: Drug Patterns Are Diverging

By **PETER KERR**

Americans generally appear to be turning away from the use of illegal drugs, but, at the same time, the poor face mounting deaths and an ever bleaker future because of drug abuse, according to Government statistics and interviews with drug experts.

What may be emerging, some experts believe, is a tale of two drug problems: one in middle-class America, which may be past the worst of a 20-year mass experiment with illegal drugs; the other in the America of the poor, where, amid hopelessness and lack of education, people will suffer the worst consequences of cocaine, heroin and AIDS.

"We are dealing with two different worlds here," said Dr. David F. Musto, a professor of psychiatry and history of medicine at Yale University who has written extensively on the history of drug-use epidemics. Incentives to Stop

"The question we must be asking now is not why people take drugs, but why do people stop," Dr. Musto said. "In the inner city, the factors that counterbalance drug use - family, employment, status within the community - often are not there. It is harder for people with nothing to say no to drugs."

In recent years, the focus of greatest concern among drug experts has been cocaine, for while the use of other drugs was dropping or remaining stable, cocaine grew widely in popularity throughout the nation in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

Findings from two major Federal studies on drug use in America show that in the last few years, better-educated young people have been reducing their use of cocaine and other drugs. Meanwhile, the least-educated have increasingly used cocaine.

Experts caution that their conclusions are tentative and that the rise of a new drug or the appearance of other unpredictable factors could easily upset current trends. And, whatever the trends, they say, drug use is so widespread that it will remain a problem in all sectors of society for years. A Mixed Message

However, they point to a newly emerging picture of drug use in America that, they say, carries a mixed message of hope for the well-off and despair for the poor. Among their major conclusions are these:

* With the exception of heroin and crack among the poor, the use of illegal drugs in the nation appears to have peaked, including the snorting of powdered cocaine.

* Federally financed studies show that the people turning away from drugs are the most educated and affluent. The poorest and least-educated have continued or increased their drug use.

* Crack, a smokable form of cocaine, has largely remained a poor people's drug. Its rise in the past two years has had devastating effects on poor neighborhoods, but it has failed to make the same inroads into the middle class.

* The most deadly impact of illegal drug use is probably yet to come, as tens of thousands of intravenous drug users, their sexual partners and their children contract acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Most of those people will be poor.

Several drug treatment experts voiced concern that as the casualties of drug abuse shift increasingly into the ghetto, the drug issue may become less visible to many Americans and receive less attention from government. Putting Pressure on Legislators

"In the heroin crisis of the late 1960's and again with crack in recent years it was the threat to the middle- and upper-middle-class kids that put pressure on legislatures and Congress," said Dr. Mitchell S. Rosenthal, the president of Phoenix House, the operator of drug treatment centers in New York and California. "There is a danger that if they feel less of a threat, the resources won't stay with the problem."

Some scholars say societies experience widespread drug use in historic cycles. From 1885 to 1920, the United States experienced an epidemic of narcotics and cocaine use. Dr. Musto argues that a similar epidemic began in about 1965, but that it took years for casualties to mount and for society to react against drugs.

Statistics indicate that outside of the poorest neighborhoods, the nation's 20-year affair with illegal drugs is on the decline.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, marijuana use peaked in 1978, and by 1985, 7 out of 10 high school seniors believed marijuana use to be harmful. Young people's use of hallucinogens, like LSD and PCP, or "angel dust," has fallen since 1979. A Different Generation

In 1985, a national household survey conducted by the University of Kentucky for the National Institute on Drug Abuse asked 18-to-25-year-olds if they had smoked marijuana in the last month. It found that people who never graduated from high school were most likely to be using the drug. The better educated the young people were, the survey found, the less they were using marijuana.

Among an earlier generation of smokers - people 35 and over, who probably developed their attitudes toward marijuana in the late 60's and early 70's - the findings were just the reverse. It was the college-educated who were most likely to be smoking marijuana.

Another study found similar results. The survey, conducted for the National Institute on Drug Abuse by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, asked high school seniors whether they had used drugs other than marijuana in the previous year.

The survey found that in 1986, seniors of all economic backgrounds were using drugs less than seniors were in 1981. But the greatest change took place among students whose parents had some graduate education: a drop of 13 percentage points, to 23.7 percent, from 36.7 percent. The least change took place among students whose parents had never been to high school: a drop of 2.7 percentage points, to 22.7 percent, from 25.4 percent. Flooding Across the Border

What confused the situation last year was cocaine, which had been rising in use since the late 70's. By last year, the white powder was flooding across the nation's southern border and was suddenly appearing in urban areas in the new smokable form of crack; from 1982 to 1986, the number of deaths and emergency room reports involving cocaine quadrupled.

For a time, experts feared that the pellet form of cocaine, which is much more quickly addicting than cocaine powder, would spread to all segments of society, including the middle class and affluent, who were using powdered cocaine. But it now appears that the growth of crack has leveled off in New York and many other cities around the country, law-enforcement and treatment officials say.

"In general we believe that cocaine has reached its peak," said David L. LeRoy, the chief of domestic intelligence with the cocaine desk of the Federal Drug Administration. "It is going to take a few months to have the numbers to prove it, but we feel fairly optimistic about it." Tracing the Growth in Appetite

The amount of cocaine entering the country could still be rising, Mr. LeRoy said, but the number of users appears to have leveled off or may be dropping. In other words, he said, the most recent growth in America's cocaine appetite can be traced to its most severe addicts, many of them inner-city crack addicts.

According to the household survey of 18-to-25-year-olds, the people most likely to have used cocaine in the previous month in 1982 were those who graduated from college. The least likely to have used cocaine were those who never finished high school. Among college graduates, 13 percent said they had used cocaine in the past month, while among those without high school diplomas, only 4 percent had used cocaine.

But by 1985, the situation was just the opposite. Only 3 percent of college graduates said they used cocaine in the last month. But 10 percent of people who never finished high school said they used the drug. Since the survey did not include people without homes, it may have understated drug use among the poorest and least-educated, according to Prof. Harwin Voss of the University of Kentucky, who helped direct the study. Severe Consequences

There is still evidence of middle-class crack use with severe consequences for those who have become addicted. In addition, treatment experts say "freebasing," or smoking of powdered cocaine, which has the same effect as smoking crack, is popular in some circles of middle-class and affluent drug users.

Nonetheless, the New York State Division of Substance Abuse Services and the Los Angeles County office of Drug Abuse report that most crack users appearing at hospitals and treatment centers are poor members of minority groups.

Such observations about crack and the poor are echoed by other drug treatment experts around the nation.

"Crack seems to have become entrenched in the inner-city areas," said James Hall, the director of Up Front Drug Information Inc., a foundation based in Miami. "With cocaine we are going to see a shrinking number of users who are going to be at greater risk from the drug. They are the poorest, the least educated, who have the least access to information."

But perhaps the most dire vision of the future concerns the intravenous users of heroin, a drug that has remained predominantly the preserve of the inner-city poor. AIDS Through Shared Needles

While the number of addicts around the nation has remained relatively stable, there has been an alarming rise in the proportion of addicts exposed to the AIDS virus from the sharing of needles.

While only a comparatively small fraction of heroin addicts died from overdoses, each year between 20 and 100 percent of those exposed to AIDS are expected to die from the disease.

Among heroin addicts entering drug treatment in New York, more than 50 percent are now testing positive for exposure to the virus, said Dr. Beny J. Primm, the executive director of the Addiction Research and Treatment Corporation, a drug treatment program in New York.

Dr. Primm described his vision of the future for the poorest black neighborhoods in New York, where homelessness and family disintegration are already rife.

"Five years from now, those people who are alive then will find their ranks devastated by AIDS, and there will be a type of hopelessness that is hard to imagine now," Dr. Primm said. "I am hearing people already say, 'I am infected with the virus, I might just as well shoot up drugs.' People will be turning more and more to drugs for solace."

Graph of percentage of nationwide high school seniors who said they used a drug other than marijuana in the last year (University of Michigan) (Page 28); photo of Dr. David F. Musto (NYT/Rollin A. Riggs) (Page 28)