

News

In the city's shadows

Editor's note: *In this first half of a two-day series, the Standard-Speaker examines how drugs affect crime in Hazleton by profiling an individual who used and sold illegal drugs. The second half profiles two local recovering addicts who were recently involved in the judicial system. Their names have been changed to protect their identities.*

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Adam was sick.

He had the shakes. He was vomiting.

He was in a boarded up house in West Hazleton, practically homeless but sharing a room the size of a closet that cost his friend \$120 a month. The only furniture was a bed.

His body was experiencing the withdrawal symptoms of heroin, prompting him to call his source in Reading to ask him to deliver more drugs.

But the roads were too covered with snow during that day in December 2004.

Adam was desperate to keep his body composed, a habit that at its peak required 30 bags of heroin a day. Without a steady intake, heroin addicts may experience convulsions, insomnia or seizures among other symptoms for 48 to 72 hours after their last use. These symptoms typically subside after a week, but many addicts stabilize themselves by returning to the drug.

It was a habit that put him into state prison for six years in his 20s. And it was a habit that demanded spur-of-the-moment retail thefts and robberies. He once held up a restaurant on North Church Street with a cake knife.

"It doesn't become a high anymore," he said. "You don't feel anything from it. You just do it to be normal."

To alleviate the sickness, Adam prepared to inject the last remaining heroin he had at the time.

He took a leftover, fingertip-sized cotton ball and placed it on a spoon full of water, hoping any remaining heroin from previous uses could be dissolved. His body felt like mosquito bites were coming out from underneath his skin as part of his oncoming withdrawal symptoms. And then he injected that liquid with a syringe.



A former drug addict talks about his experiences. BLAINE FALKENA / STANDARD-SPEAKER

He then shot vodka into his veins as though it was heroin, attempting to calm his body, and he waited for his dealer to arrive that night.

The problem

Experts in the area estimate that 90 percent of all criminal activity here is drug-related. Those crimes are typically led by addicts whose habits often leave them homeless or on the verge of poverty, affecting family members, local residents and various businesses.

"Once the body gets addicted, it's very hard to kick. It's a matter of survival," said Ed Pane, president and chief executive officer of Serento Gardens, a substance abuse treatment program in Hazleton that loses more than nine out of every 10 patients back to heroin. Pane calls this recidivism rate "astoundingly high." In Pennsylvania, heroin is the primary drug after alcohol to make residents seek rehabilitation, according to Drug-rehabs.org.

"There's no treatment center in this town. There's no detox at the hospital," Adam said.

Adam described the mindset of an addict who he said has no car and no other options except drugs. He said that the easier choice for that type of person about to suffer withdrawal symptoms is to shoot up the drug in order to keep one's composure.

Plans for an opiate treatment program are currently being pursued by Discovery House, a Rhode Island-based company with clinics across the country.

"Certainly we remain committed to the area," said Rob Kornacki, director of development. "Certainly there's a tremendous need."

The company has subsequently sought to secure a location for the center at 570 W. Broad St., its third attempt in the city. Kornacki explained the difference between a place like Serento Gardens and an opiate treatment center is that Discovery House is licensed to use assisted medical treatment. Programs where individuals receive methadone help 35 percent of recovering addicts to remain free of heroin.

For the time being, Hazleton addicts find support at A Better Today and Serento Gardens, in addition to Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

But even with these support groups, Adam sees tremendous challenges for local addicts. These programs, he said, required him to shoot up before the meeting just to make it through.

"The main obstacle is thinking 'I need to get my bags by 6 p.m. or I'm going to be so ... sick,'" he said. Getting help, he said, would require a phone call and transportation to a regional center. "You can't imagine going to detox."

"Adam"

Adam, now 29, has been clean from drugs and alcohol for more than three years. But his crimes in the 1990s and 2000s illustrate a glimpse of the underground, ant-like network of drug deals and addicts in the Hazleton area.

In lieu of drug money, Adam would typically shoplift Mach razors and Crest Whitestrips. Called boosting, dealers will sometimes give addicts grocery lists of items to steal. Sometimes those items include steaks and actual groceries. Police officers in the area say the most common way local addicts afford drugs nowadays is through retail thefts.

Adam grew up using marijuana, alcohol and pills by age 12, acid by 14, and coke and heroin at 14 to 15. And at age 17, he shot up heroin. He said he never lived normally — that is without drugs — and that he got his first driver's license a month ago.

His initial contact with drugs was part of growing up in Hazleton with "nothing to do," he says with a laugh.

He afforded his recreational use of drugs in his preteens by stealing checks and money from his parents. He said he still found money stashes even when his parents moved the hiding places for their earnings around the house. He eventually began stealing change from cars, then progressed to boosting. It culminated into armed robberies and credit card forgery.

"It can start off small, but as the habit grows, so does the severity of the crime," said Al Ciliberto, a case worker at Serento Gardens.

Sometimes the section of a store Adam would go to hit would already be robbed from that morning.

"I wasn't a smart criminal," he said, describing his mentality as similar to any other "dope fiend."

His crimes also included stick-ups and purse snatches, and his first arrest was in the late 90s, which landed him a 19-to-38 month sentence.

"Most drug addicts are sick and sloppy. It's spur of the moment," Adam said. On parole from his first sentence, he was arrested for snatching a purse and served time in state prison again.

Although he stayed for a month in a halfway house in Reading after his sentence, he established a connection for dope a day after he left. Adam then got high within a week. His habit continued, and a few years ago, he broke into a car to steal credit cards, landing him another sentence.

While incarcerated, he once broke into seizures stemming from withdrawal. That involuntary form of withdrawal, Pane says, is an indirect form of detox.

The dealers

In Hazleton, some users' habits lead to dealing drugs to support their own habits. Others are strictly business, and deal drugs simply for the money.

"We've come across individuals making six figures a year and have not raised eyebrows," said Pane, who distinguishes addicts into two categories: bulk users and users supporting their own habits.

It's a business with constant demand, and some customers are full-time addicts. Deals happen "anytime of the day, anywhere," said Cpl. Josh Winters, an officer with the Sugarloaf Police Department for nearly five years whose patrol area has included the Penn State Hazleton campus and Laurel Mall.

The cost to support addicts' habits also varies immensely, according to Winters. He estimated local addicts spend \$50 to \$100 each day to support their habits, but he said that range is extremely general.

Det. Chris Orozco, as head of the Hazleton Police Department's gang unit, also sees the diversity of users' habits and dealers' involvements in the area.

"In Hazleton, you've got dealers running their businesses like corporations to hot dog stands," Orozco said.

Dealers may be organized, supporting more than 100 steady customers like the drug network uncovered in Operation Boomerang last fall, whereas other dealers may only have 10 clients in order to support their own habit without having to work.

Operation Boomerang, a state-involved undercover investigation of a Hazleton cocaine ring, charged more than 32 suspected dealers. Those sting operations may prevent dealers from selling for days, weeks or even months, Orozco said.

Although the area has no cartel-like hierarchy, he said, drugs help support organized, gang activity. If there were no drugs, there would be no reason for gangs, he said.

When asked whether drug dealers or drug addicts commit more crimes, sources interviewed said the person using the drugs is the one responsible for most of the crime.

"The dealer can basically sit back for the addict to commit the crimes to get the money," Orozco said. The dealer's "basic position is 'They're going to bring the money to me. I have what they want, and they're going to come to me.' "

Whereas dealers are more prone to larger financial operations, addicts are much less organized. Often, addicts are seeking small amounts of money to support a quick fix.

But stopping these transactions themselves prove a vicious cycle for police. The imprisonment of a dealer typically results in an addict or lower-level dealer taking the place of their source.

Serento Gardens case workers compared this replacement to a waiting list.

"When one disappears, another replaces the person in hours," Ciliberto said.

"In the end," Orozco said, "If the user still wants it, it dictates that someone is going to supply it."

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