

Afghan Drug Boom Fuels Child Addiction Rates

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Doctors estimate that there are more than 2,000 drug-addicted children in the western city of Herat alone. Idris, 16, sells cigarettes for a living. Walking along the road in Herat with a wooden box hanging from his neck, he confesses that he had moved onto stronger substances.

“I didn’t want to become addicted, but I started smoking since I was selling cigarettes,” he said. “Then I tried hashish with other kids. Now I can’t work unless I smoke hash two or three times a day.”

Idris is an orphan who lost his family in fighting when the Taleban were attacking the forces of local leader Ismail Khan back in the Nineties. Homeless, he sells cigarettes during the day and sleeps in city parks at night.

There are many young people like him in Afghanistan, where families have been torn apart over decades of war.

Nur Ahmad, 15, makes his living by shining shoes on the street. He, too, is alone: after his father was killed, his mother remarried but his stepfather threw him out of the house.

“I started on snuff, moved on to cigarettes and now hashish,” he told IWPR. “Now I smoke hashish with my friends every night.”

Observers say that drug addiction among children has risen precipitously in recent years. This is especially true in western areas like Herat, because of the influx of returning refugees from neighbouring Iran, where addiction rates are high.

Dr Abdul Shukur Shukur, of the Shahamat Centre, a non-government institution that helps combat drug abuse, told IWPR that he had seen a 20 per cent rise in juvenile addiction over last year.

“We have children between the ages of six and 16 at our centre,” he said.

There are many reasons why children start using drugs, said Dr Shukur, including the lack of parental supervision, the large number of children orphaned by war, the return of refugees from Iran, and Afghanistan’s booming illicit narcotics industry, which means drugs are readily available.

Dr Shukur estimated that there are more than 2,000 drug-addicted children in the city of Herat alone.

A report issued by the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime in late 2005 put the number of drug users in Afghanistan at 920,000, with 60,000 of them under 15.

This year and next, opium and its derivative heroin will be even more plentiful, as poppy cultivation is on the rise despite eradication efforts sponsored by the international community. UNODC estimates that 60 per cent more land was planted with opium in 2006, so that the harvest will hit 6,100 tonnes.

"Afghanistan is increasingly hooked on its own drug," UNODC Executive Director Antonio Maria Costa said after presenting the latest estimates for cultivation and production in September.

Abdul Hai Mahmudi, who heads the Khoja Abdullah Ansari orphanage in Herat, says homeless children are vulnerable to addiction and to exploitation as "mules" carrying drugs for the traffickers.

"We have provided shelter for about 1,000 children, but that's only 20 per cent of all the homeless children in the city. We just don't have the capacity to take them all," he told IWPR, saying some of the children in the orphanage were receiving treatment for their addiction.

Mahmudi said homeless children are targeted by smugglers because they make good couriers and arouse little suspicion with the police.

Nur Khan Nekzad, press spokesman for police headquarters in Herat, confirmed this.

"We have caught ten children who were being used to smuggle drugs," he said. "Through them, we have been able to arrest the traffickers standing behind them."

Another cause of juvenile drug addiction is the widespread use of opiates to keep children quiet, said Juma Khan Karimzada, head of a charity that provides assistance to disabled children in Ghor, a province east of Herat

"The real reason for drug addiction in children is the high volume of poppy cultivation in the province," he told IWPR. "Many parents use poppy paste to calm their children, and this then leads to addiction."

Karimzada's organisation is among several trying to combat the practice by getting the word out to parents, though the mosques and schools, but the problem persists.

Other people, including children, become addicted while harvesting the poppy crop through their long exposure to opium.

Mohammad Zarif, 17, who lives in the Braman district of Herat province, told IWPR that he became addicted while cutting poppy plants in nearby Farah province.

"I'm not happy that I'm an addict," he said. "But I can't stop - there is no treatment for me. There is no real employment, either, and I do anything I have to in order to get food and drugs."

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