

The Drug Courier Children of Herat

Author: [Fawad Ahmadi](#)

I was on my way home at about 4 pm one day when I stopped at a red traffic light at the Shahr-e Naw intersection in the western Afghan city of Herat. Children often wait here and clean car windscreens, hoping for money.

Two boys, aged no more than 11, came up to my car and started wiping the windows. I stopped them and told them, "Go and study." One replied, "We are poor and need to take some bread home."

But his friend said loudly that he was lying and that he had a brother and father, and was begging in order to buy cigarettes and opium for himself.

That shocked me and after the light went green, I turned the car around and got out to look for the boy. When I found him, I asked if he was really an addict. "It is none of your business, uncle. Go away and mind your own business," he replied.

I told him that I would help him and asked again whether he was an addict. He said angrily, "Yes, I am an addict. I smoke cigarettes and opium. Happy now?"

After this, he ran away and I went home. I thought about that child until midnight. The next day, I contacted the IWPR office and we talked about the issue. They asked me to start working on a story immediately.

I contacted Gholam Jilani Daqiq, director of counter-narcotics operations in the interior ministry for an interview. On the way to meet him, the thought struck me that the children might have been teasing me.

But to my disappointment, Daqiq confirmed their story.

"Unfortunately, 2,200 out of 10,000 street children in Herat are currently addicts," he told me. "There is a clinic called Shahamat in Herat which treats children as well as adults, but sadly it has few places."

He said that one of the reasons for children turning to drugs was their parents' own addiction to narcotics, and that most of the addicts were Afghan refugees who had returned from Iran.

From there, I went to Herat police headquarters to interview Mohammad Idris, the administrative director.

He told me about another concern. "The children not only use narcotics but are also involved in smuggling them," he said. "Most smuggler groups use children to deliver drugs."

He added that when children are arrested, nobody comes to get them and the police have no room to detain them all. "We have sent some of them to the reform and education centre of children, but the facilities are limited there as well," he said.

I decided to visit this reform and education centre, but initially the officials there refused to give me an interview. I had to use my contacts to pave the way for access, and eventually the director, Mir Mohammad Sediq Husseini, agreed to let me visit.

He was very angry though, and told me as soon as I got there, "You do not have the right to take photos. You can only interview one or two of them." He also insisted that a policeman accompany me.

In Afghanistan, most government officials are unfamiliar with journalistic practice. They consider cooperating with journalists to be absurd and a source of extra work. I wanted to be alone, because if the policeman accompanied me the children might not tell me the truth.

So on the way to the cell, I tried to make friends with the policeman. He said, "Take a picture of me and publish it. Then you can interview however you like."

So he waited outside the room where the children were being held and I went in alone.

There I met Abdollah, 13, who said that he came from a poor family and that his father had become addicted to drugs in Iran. His mother washes clothes and his younger sisters go to school.

Abdollah was cleaning windows of cars in Herat city and making up to 100 afghanis (two US dollars) per day. One day, he was sitting on a bench in the park thinking about his life and family when he noticed a man looking at him.

When he went over to beg some money, the man had told him if he worked with him he would not have to beg anymore. "I asked him what to do. He said, 'I will give you some packages and you will deliver them to the houses I show you and for each delivery you will get a 500 afghani note and it will be one delivery a day.'"

Abdollah said at first he was scared, but thinking of the money he delivered a package without knowing the contents.

"I got change for the 500 note, gave 100 to my mother and the rest of it to my father. When my father got the money, he kissed me for the first time in my life," Abdollah said.

Abdollah said that one day the man who hired him, Naser, invited him to his house for lunch. As he told me the story, he looked down and started crying.

"When Naser took me home, he sexually abused me. He gave me 1,000 afghanis and told me not to tell anyone or I would be killed," he said.

Abdollah said that he was eventually arrested by the police with drugs on him and that he was brought to the reform and education centre. He said that Naser and his colleagues were also arrested.

Crying, he asked me, "For God's sake do something to help me get released as my father does not care about me and my mother and sisters are starving."

At that point, the centre's director came over to us and was angry. "You reporters never listen to us. Get out of here now," he said.

He pointed at the policeman and told him to get me out of there and slammed the door behind us.

Noor Khan Nikzad, the spokesman at police headquarters in Herat, was also at first unwilling to give an interview and needed a lot of persuasion.

But all he would say was that they had arrested many children for smuggling drugs and sent them to the reform and education centre.

In response to allegations made by the children at the centre that they had been beaten by the police, Noor Khan Nikzad said, "Perhaps, when they commit a crime and the police arrest them, they also spank them a few times."

He did not want to talk anymore and made an excuse to end the interview.

When I shared my problems with the director of the children's advocacy centre, Mir Gholam Sediq, he smiled and said, "You reporters scream a lot, but no one hears you."

Over a cup of tea, he showed me papers which reported that 10,000 street children, mostly from other provinces, could be found in Herat. He mentioned poverty, unemployment, insecurity and the failures of government officials as factors in the increasing numbers of street children.

My report got good feedback, because when the story was republished by some local media outlets, officials started thinking about the creation of treatment centres for street children.

I was told that a new opium addiction treatment centre for children was opened within a month, created by the ministry of counter narcotics in cooperation with some donor countries.

I visited some sections of the centre and felt happy when I left; my conscience was eased somewhat because I was able to provide at least a small service for the abandoned children and young people with my pen.

When I came back to my office, I lay down on my couch and thought about Abdollah for some minutes, of the cruelty he had experienced, and the fact that there were hundreds of others like him.

Fawad Ahmadi is an IWPR trainee reporter in Herat.

[Link to original article](#) by Fawad Ahmadi in Herat. Published in ARR No. 348, 17-Dec-09

The Story Behind the Story gives an insight into the work that goes into IWPR articles and the challenges faced by our trainees at every stage of the editorial process.

This feature allows our journalists to explain where they get the inspiration for their articles, why the subjects matter to them, and how they personally have felt affected by the often controversial issues they explore.

It also shows the difficulties writers can face as they try to get to the heart of a story.

Location: Iraqi Kurdistan

Iran

Afghanistan

Topic: Story Behind the Story

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/drug-courier-children-herat>