

Drug Use Increasing Among the Young

Author: [Wahidullah Amani](#)

A nation better known for supplying narcotics to the world market is discovering it has an increasing drugs problem in its own back yard.

The country recognised as the leading producer of the opium used in other parts of the world is now facing a drug-abuse crisis at home.

For many, the most disturbing aspect of the problem is the growing number of young people addicted to narcotics. In Kabul alone, police say they arrest between 20 and 40 young people between the ages of ten and 18 for drug-related crimes every day.

The authorities say they feel powerless to combat the increase in drug use among the young.

Poor social conditions, a high percentage of war orphans and reaction against the restrictions of the Taliban years are all cited as reasons for this upsurge.

"This problem increased when people who had been refugees in Iran and Pakistan returned home," said one drugs expert. "Children had picked up the drug-taking habit over there."

Penalties for drug trafficking are still severe - up to life imprisonment - but perhaps not as brutal as under Taliban rule, when offenders were sometimes flogged to death in public.

But police tend to turn a blind eye to the ordinary user not involved in drug trafficking.

There are no official statistics available on how many Afghans use illegal drugs. In Kabul, it is estimated that 60,000 of the capital's 3.5 million residents regularly use narcotics.

"Every day, children and young people can be seen taking narcotics in the parks and other public places," said Abdul Jamail, the head of the crime investigation department for the Kabul police. "We bring them in and talk to them about the harmful effects of addiction. But there's not much more we can do."

Because there are so few drug-treatment centres in the country, especially for young people, police say there is little they can do to combat the problem.

The few facilities that do exist feel overwhelmed by the problem.

Dr Tariq Sulaiman, the director of the Nejat Centre in Kabul, said his facility can only treat 10 patients per month. The unit is supported by United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime.

"Since 1991 we have treated more than 2,000 children at this centre," he said.

Dr Sulaiman blamed "starvation, poverty and migration" as the main causes of drug addiction among the young.

In addition, he said that very young children who work extracting the opium sap from poppies in the fields can become "accidentally" addicted by either ingesting or inhaling the drug.

In addition, infants born to drug-using mothers are sometimes addicted from birth.

Some of the patients at a treatment centre, housed in a one-story building in the Kart-e-Parwan district of Kabul, which is run by the justice ministry and treats up to 36 youngsters aged between eight and 18, told how they became addicted to drugs.

"I was just eight when my father and mother died and after that I lived with my uncle," said Abdul Hakim, 16. "All my friends were smoking cigarettes and they made me try too."

A few years later, he said he and his friends travelled to Quetta in Pakistan, where they started smoking heroin.

"My uncle was taking drugs and urged me to take them too," said Ghafar, 17. "Gradually I've become addicted and when I didn't take them, I couldn't sleep."

At the treatment centre in the city's psychiatric hospital, Mukhtar, 16, from Kabul was dousing his head with cold water in order to ease the pain of drug withdrawal.

He said that he hadn't taken heroin for the last 24 hours and his body ached all over.

"About 18 months ago I was urged to take heroin by Sarwar, a friend of mine who was an addict," Mukhtar said. "It was my first time."

He said the drug made him feel sleepy and very relaxed. "After that we used to take heroin together every day," he said.

But when his friend moved to Mazar-e-Sharif, Mukhtar said his supply of drugs dried up and he began stealing money from home to support his habit.

Eventually his family took him to the hospital, where he now hopes to end his addiction.

But treatment can be slow and sometimes fails.

Nasratullah Muhseni, a doctor at the psychiatric hospital, said, "We have advisers and they talk to addicts to find out the reasons and type of addiction, the volume of drugs they use and any other related information."

"If an addict is taking a narcotic 15 times a day, we will gradually reduce the dose," he said. "Sometimes the treatment will be carried on at home by drugs advisers. Other times patients will be admitted for treatment if they are prepared to be hospitalised.

"Usually people will spend between ten and 30 days in hospital."

The hospital has 30 beds, not nearly enough, Dr Muhseni said, considering that between 10 and 15 addicts come to the hospital every day seeking treatment.

Mirwais Yasini, head of the government's counter-narcotics programme, said that all groups and agencies must start taking serious measures to cope with the problem.

"It's more dangerous than terrorism," he said.

Wahidullah Amani is a staff writer for IWPR in Kabul.

Location: [Pakistan](#)
[Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
[Iran](#)

Focus: [Afghanistan](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/drug-use-increasing-among-young>