

Kazak Drugs Spiral

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Kazak youngsters are being sucked into a spiral of petty crime and drug abuse

In the cultural and spiritual vacuum left by the fall of communism, drug abuse and drug-related crime in Kazakhstan have reached epidemic proportions.

According to figures released by the president's National Committee for Family and Women's Affairs, the number of teenagers registered by Kazak drug-treatment centres has increased four-fold in the last three years.

Official figures estimate there are 37,000 drug users in the country. However, independent surveys put the figure even higher.

Klara Sultangalieva, director of the Centre for Promoting a Healthy Lifestyle in the western oblast of Atyrau, believes around 40 per cent of young people in Kazakhstan use drugs. Vera Sukhorukova, the regional governor or akim of Ust-Kamenogorsk, estimates that addiction has grown 19-fold over the past 10 years.

Teenagers are among those worst hit, especially in the larger cities. Almaty's main drug-treatment center is currently catering to 3,730 youngsters between 15 and 18 according to Victor Khrapunov, the city's akim.

Khrapunov is concerned about the easy availability of narcotics. "You can buy synthetic drugs such as ecstasy in our nightclubs," he said "while hard drugs, especially heroin, are being sold with impunity in schools and colleges."

A teenage boy from the northern regional capital of Kokshetau said most drugs could be bought at the local market. "A matchbox of grass costs 70 tenge during the day and 100 in the evening," he said.

One of the main reasons drugs are so widely available is that Kazakhstan lies at the crossroads of transit routes for drug smugglers from Afghanistan and 'The Golden Triangle' region of South East Asia.

In fact, according to UN statistics, 65 per cent of all drugs produced in Afghanistan are transported through the central Asian states.

A significant proportion is smuggled through the Fergana Valley to Kazakhstan, then on to Russia and Western Europe.

Natalia Alieva, a specialist at the Jambyl Healthy Lifestyle Centre, in southern Kazakhstan, a well known opium growing area, said that in the first six months of last year alone, 600 kilogrammes of drugs were seized and more than 850 drug-related crimes reported.

Like the rest of the country, Jambyl suffers from a soaring cost of living and plummeting social standards. With no recourse to social services or state handouts, homeless youngsters are quickly sucked into a spiral

of petty crime and drug abuse.

One 15-year-old Kazak boy I met had been sent to a special school after he was caught stealing to feed his drugs habit. "If the state had paid my parents' wages on time," he said, "then we would all have had enough to eat and we wouldn't have been forced to steal or mix with bad company."

Similarly, a 17-year-old girl being held for prostitution and vagrancy in a Taraz rehabilitation centre tells a familiar story of rejection and despair. "My mother abandoned me when I was seven," she said. "They took me to a children's home and when I left I had nowhere to go."

Until another girl from the center invited her to Almaty.

"She said she'd find a job for me there. She forced me to sell my body, then she abandoned me. Eventually, I was sent to a children's refuge and then to the rehabilitation centre in Taraz. Now, I just want to put my past behind me and be like other kids."

As drug addiction escalates, there has seen a corresponding increase in the number of AIDS cases, as addicts share contaminated syringes.

Madi Beksultanov, leader of national youth movement For the Future of Kazakstan, said government statistics revealed there were now more than a thousand AIDS sufferers in Kazakstan - 85 per cent of those testing positive were infected by contaminated syringes.

But to get a true picture of the speed at which AIDS is spreading you need to multiply this figure seven to ten times, he said.

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