

Upscale Crack

Oil workers and bankers are its new victims, not the down-and-out

By Alexandra Shimo, Maclean's Jan 1 ,2007



While working as an engineer in Alberta's oil and gas fields, Brent 34 (he requested that his last name not be used), started smoking crack. Like most of those who try the drug, he had already experimented with other drugs—alcohol and marijuana. But after just a few short puffs of the white drug-laced smoke, he had a very expensive and destructive habit.

Crack is made by adding cocaine to baking soda and water, cooking and cooling the mixture until rocks develop. Although it has a reputation for being a cheap high for the down-and-out, the reality is increasingly different, say drug counsellors across the country. The illicit substance is becoming the drug of choice across social milieus, says Jodi Dahlgren, a substance abuse therapist at Serenity House drug & Alcohol Treatment Centre in Calgary. Dahlgren has treated bankers, oil workers, and CEO's with crack addiction problems. "I used to work at Main and Hastings in Vancouver, but I've never seen anything this bad. I never thought I'd be treating millionaires with crack addictions."

Brent is typical of this new class of addict. Like many users, he burned through a lot of money on crack. Although the exact amount is hard to estimate—he still hasn't tallied how much he spent on hotel rooms alone to host drug-fuelled parties—the figure is at least \$250,000, which includes the remortgaging of his home and several thousand dollars in RSPs. "I feel terrible for the girls we were partying with," he says remorsefully. "They were good girls from middle class homes. Some of them were still going to high school."

The latest statistics, while they don't distinguish between crack and cocaine in its powder form, suggest the drug is the second-most popular single illicit substance after cannabis. More than 14 per cent of males reported having tried it; and 10.6 per cent of the total population according to the Canadian Addiction Survey published in March 2005. In Alberta 12.3 per cent of those surveyed had tried it.

Brent never found it hard to get hold of the drug. Indeed for upscale addicts, door-to-door delivery is more common than scoring at a crack house, he says. Part of its growing popularity is this accessibility, says Melanie Alsager, an administrator at Sunshine Coast Health Centre, a private facility in Powell River, 120 km north of Vancouver that treats drug addicts and alcoholics from across North America. In most Canadian cities, buying crack is almost as easy as purchasing a loaf of bread, she says. "If you know what to look

for, you can go into the downtown of any city in Canada, and find the crack house within 10 minutes."

Price is the other reason for crack's popularity, says Ruth Weinberger, addictions counsellor and group facilitator at Project Pride, a drug crisis centre in Montreal. "Crack has gone from \$140. Ten years ago to \$15 to \$20 a rock today. It costs about the same as smoking a joint. We are seeing a glut of it on the market.

One neighbourhood that has begun to bear the brunt of this glut is Toronto's Kensington Market. It's home to artisans and hipsters such as CBC Radio host Sook-Yin Lee, but a recent rise in crack use has hurt residents, crime rates, and businesses. The problem surfaced in the spring, worsened throughout the summer, and is still pretty bad, says Eric Yule, chair of the Kensington Market Emergency Safety Task Force, which was set up in September to respond to the issue. Some local shops and businesses saw their sales fall between 40 and 50 per cent.. Petty crime increased-breaking and enterings have spiked 16 per cent since the previous year. Like most neighbourhoods struggling with the consequences of cheap and plentiful crack, it's difficult for residents to know how exactly to eliminate the problem. After the spike in burglaries, and several assaults, some were afraid of openly taking action against the dealers in case they were targeted, says James Maskalyk, an emergency doctor who lives in the area.

Neal Berger is the executive director of Cedars at Cobble Hill on Vancouver Island, north of Victoria which treated Brent's addiction and helped him return to work in the oil and gas industry. Berger says that while "there is so much energy and political capital looking at the business of crystal meth, crack is a much bigger issue. When you think of the problems it causes families, businesses and industry it doesn't get nearly the exposure it deserves." Addiction specialist Dr. Graeme Cunningham agrees. "It's available and cheap," says Cunningham, regional medical director for Homewood Health Centre in Guelph and professor of psychiatry at McMaster University. "If you go to Toronto's downtown core, you can score it in five minutes. The problem is that it is very much a fashion at the moment. It's become popular among the younger crowd."