

LOW LEVELS OF HEROIN MISUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND: EXPLANATIONS  
AND SUBCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT. MADRA FINNIGAN M.A. THESIS  
SUMMARY

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Please find attached notes that Bernie has asked me to pass on. They are notes prepared using information contained in a student thesis kindly provided by Kieran McEvoy.

**DIANE SMYTH**

(i) ~~Heroin~~ will note  
(ii) ~~Belfast~~ ~~BD~~  
(iii) ~~File~~ - Heroin

**LOW LEVELS OF HEROIN MISUSE IN NORTHERN IRELAND: EXPLANATIONS  
AND SUBCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT MAURA FINNEGAN M Sc. THESIS.  
SUMMARY**

**1. Low Level of Heroin Use in Northern Ireland**

- In 1994 5,672 grams of heroin and opiate based substances were seized in the Republic of Ireland compared to 34 grams in Northern Ireland.
- There were 120 notified addicts (of whom 85 were heroin addicts) in Northern Ireland in 1995 compared to 2,664 registered addicts in the Republic. In Great Britain in December 1994 there were 34,000 notified addicts, the number exceeding that in Northern Ireland by 11:1 measured in proportion to the population.
- Indicators associated with injecting drug misuse are relatively low in Northern Ireland e.g. rates of HIV, Hepatitis C and medical reports on the effects of injecting misuse.
- Unlike prisons in the Republic there does not appear to be any significant heroin use in Northern Ireland prisons, although the drug is available its use is very low.
- Illicit drugs used in the Province are cannabis, ecstasy, LSD and speed the focus of attention of the youth culture and the local rave scene.
- The low level of education to the general public about heroin misuse and injecting is felt to be appropriate to the level of the problem by professionals working in the field.

**2. Concentration of Heroin Addicts in Northern Ireland**

- The register of 120 drug addicts shows they are concentrated in a number of health authority regions: 46 in Belfast and 26 in the Homefirst Trust area which serves the North and North Antrim regions. This distribution supports the reports of heroin using subcultures in South Belfast and Ballymena.
- Shaftesbury Square Hospital is the only statutory treatment centre in Belfast. From April 1996 to April 1997 there were 28 intravenous heroin addicts treated at the Hospital, and a further 10 presented for treatment who had been smoking

heroin. A preliminary study of these addicts carried out by the professionals at the hospital shows: 23 of the 28 addicts were male, the average age at the time of seeking treatment was 28 years and the average age at first use of heroin was 23 years. The primary drug of abuse was heroin but the addicts were found to use a variety of other drugs. The rates of HIV and Hepatitis C for this group of addicts was similar to that found amongst drug users in other parts of the UK. The majority of the addicts (54%) commenced using drugs in Northern Ireland, contrary to the belief of professionals that addicts start their drug misuse outside Northern Ireland.

- The RUC drug squad believe that a heroin using fraternity exists among some of the Chinese community in Northern Ireland with supplies imported to Northern Ireland via business contacts for use only amongst the Chinese community. There is little evidence but there was a paramilitary murder of three Chinese men in 1992 because they were said to be supplying hard drugs in Northern Ireland.
- There is widespread misuse of opiate based prescribable drugs but the extent is difficult to measure. Greater numbers present for treatment with misuse of dihyracodeine DF118, an opiate based prescribable drug than with heroin.
- There were two large pharmaceutical robberies in Northern Ireland in 1997 with substantial quantities of opiate based products stolen but police believed the drugs were destined for the Dublin market.
- Detoxification services in Northern Ireland-There are no waiting lists in the Province, addicts suffering from drugs associated illnesses like Hepatitis C can be offered expensive treatments not available elsewhere in the UK. Methadone however is only available as part of an inpatient detoxification programme. Doctors in Northern Ireland have a voluntary agreement not to prescribe methadone as part of outpatient treatment as a substantial amount of methadone from drug maintenance programmes always finds its way into the black market, therefore helping to create more addicts.
- A subculture of heroin users exists in Ballymena and South Belfast. In the South Belfast area the heroin subculture is focused upon the Highlands community, which has a high proportion of students, a transient population. This means the

area is characterised by a lack of community ties where criminal behaviour can develop. In other areas heroin seizures only indicate individual use.

- Health professionals and the Police are confident that heroin will not become more available or a greater problem over the next few years. More concern is focused upon the greater availability of cocaine and amphetamines and the possibilities of an injecting subculture.

### 3. The Dublin Heroin Epidemic

- The number of heroin offences in Dublin increased from 5 in 1979 to 47 in 1980 and to 177 in 1981. The number presenting for treatment at Jervis Street Drug Centre, one of two drug treatment centres in the city increased from 5 per month in 1979 to 239 per month in 1983.
- The reason for this development was the widespread availability of heroin as the local criminal fraternity with established networks in all areas of the city moved into drugs. A large amount of drugs began to pour through Ireland, which became a staging post in a drugs operation with global dimensions. The Irish criminals had established links with foreign traffickers. The move to drugs was caused by difficulties faced by criminals in carrying out other large profit making crimes e. g. high security control of money transportation. There was an upsurge in the availability of heroin in Europe with the Iranian revolution and the Dublin criminal fraternity saw drugs as a less risky and profitable crime.
- The traffickers in Dublin find easy markets for heroin amongst the working class communities of Dublin. (people seeking escape from a lifestyle of unemployment, low educational achievement and poor social life). It was amongst these marginalised communities that the heroin problem in Dublin first became evident.
- The Dublin Government response was not effective despite the 1984 Misuse of Drugs Act. No more new treatment centres were established. In response local vigilante groups were established such as Concerned Parents Against Drugs.(CPAD). The CPAD groups started to police local areas, naming dealers and forcing them to leave the area if they didn't stop dealing. There was no

co-operation between the local CPAD groups and the Gardai as local people who provided the key information were hostile to the police.

- By the mid 80's there were HIV/Aids problems in Dublin and it was the marginal working class groups who were vulnerable to infection. The Government launched the Methadone Maintenance Programme with the development of a city wide needle exchange system.
- The current heroin problem in Dublin is said to be 5000-7000 addicts with some suggesting a figure of 10,000. Heroin is openly available with dealers operating in areas like O'Connell Street.
- This has led to a drug related crime problem in Dublin, with 80% of property crime said to be drug related.
- Heroin misuse is common among the prison population of the Republic, with 33% of Mountjoy prisoners heroin injectors.
- There has been the growth of community vigilante groups to resist drug misuse.
- The IRA have been linked to shootings of those involved in the drug trade.
- Drug war victims in the Republic include the contract killing of journalist Veronica Guerin in 1996. In response the Government has introduced a new criminal bill directed against the drug trade.

#### **4. Reasons for the Non Development of Heroin Problem in Northern Ireland**

- The close knit nature of communities in Northern Ireland with strong family ties has prevented the development of widespread heroin abuse. In addition the working class areas are segregated by religious groupings with a strong emphasis upon conformity.
- Police powers and numbers in the Province with the power to stop and search inhibits the development of drugs and other crimes.
- Paramilitary violence and intimidation has been directed against the use of hard drugs like heroin and general crime in local community areas. The murder of drug dealers by Direct Action Against Drugs and the general anti drug front have limited the development of heroin. Some evidence suggests paramilitary involvement in the supplying of other drugs in the Province.

- The absence of a methadone treatment programme has led to a displacement of the problem, in that addicts from Northern Ireland migrate to other areas where they can avail of these facilities (e.g. Dublin or Great Britain).

## **5. The Heroin Using Subculture in Ballymena**

- As well as a high level of affluence Ballymena has pockets of deprivation which are linked to high levels of drug misuse in the inner city and on estates such as Ballykeel and Doury Road, characterised by high rates of unemployment, disability, non-earner households and low proportions of owner occupiers.
- Heroin misuse began on the Doury Road estate. There was already a history of drug users in the 1960's and 1970's of mainly LSD and cannabis. In the 1980's there was the development of the rave culture and the growth of associated drugs like ecstasy and amphetamines. Two dealers on the estate were supplying recreational drugs and controlled other dealers (a total of 8 at one time). These two dealers had developed a distribution network based on the local rave scene. In 1994/95 the two dealers began to obtain supplies of heroin which they made available in the Ballymena area through their local distribution network. There was a growth in heroin use and crack cocaine, especially among young unemployed males in the area, with dealing taking place openly on the estate.
- Why did this development take place on this Ballymena estate: social disadvantage and low employment levels, lack of paramilitary influence, limited community structures and facilities, the impoverished nature of the area, absence of strong policing found in the city and the good infrastructure and close proximity to ports and airports which made the transportation of drugs easier.
- Police underestimate the size of the problem of heroin misuse in Ballymena, saying there were only 8 heroin users and 2 crack-cocaine users in the area. But one of the professionals interviewed mentioned 20 plus heroin users in control of their habit on the Doury Road estate and another 5 smokers who were engaged in criminal activity to fund their habit in the same area. The majority of users of heroin were smokers because the quality of the heroin was poor and not suitable for injecting.

- A subculture exists in the Ballymena area who are prepared to try any kind of substances or they are into polydrug use involving the use of a number of substances depending on what is available. There is now a subculture of heroin smokers who see their usage as normal.
- A development of the heroin misuse has been the development of drug related crime in the Ballymena area in such areas as theft and burglary. In addition there have been inter group violence with shootings, beatings and at least one death.



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