



County houses users, dealers

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of the Special Report

(chairman of Chrysler) working on the line," he said. Thompson was particularly surprised by one investigation that revealed what police didn't know about local drug trafficking. That case involved nine people (eight from Troy and one from West Bloomfield) who, Thompson said, ran a multi-million dollar operation. When arrested, the man Thompson identified as the leader of the operation had \$600,000 in cash, presumably some of the fruits of that network.

"One year earlier, we didn't know it (the drug ring) existed," Thompson said. The multi-million dollar network — complete with money laundering system — had hundreds, perhaps thousands, of customers, he said, yet police didn't have a clue to its existence until a chance arrest in February 1989 put investigative wheels in motion. Authorities wonder about other local drug networks yet to be discovered.

Social issue

But drug abuse is more than a criminal problem to be addressed by undercover cops, diligent grand juries or tough prosecutors and judges. It's a complex social issue aggravating problems like spouse abuse, absenteeism, low productivity, suicides and poor health, said Ruth Evens, Oakland County substance abuse coordinator. She knows of more than 6,000 people for whom drug abuse wasn't a criminal matter, but a destructive condition to be treated at the more than 100 clinics, hospitals or health centers. Her records show that 6,084 people sought help for substance abuse in 1988-89, up from 5,284 in the previous year.

While the 1988-89 figure is 15 percent higher, it's deceptive and not necessarily an indication that drug abuse increased, Evens said.

The number of people seeking help for drug abuse is probably a better reflection of factors like public awareness, she said. It also reflects the availability of treatment and the affluence — public funds, health insurance or private wealth — needed to pay for medical help.

Statistics compiled by county officials paint an interesting, although disturbing, picture of those seeking treatment for drug abuse — and, by extrapolation, a reasonably accurate sampling of drug users in general.

For one thing, the most commonly abused drug is alcohol, by a wide margin over cocaine, marijuana, heroin and others. Sixty-four percent of those seeking help for substance abuse in Oakland County said alcohol was the primary drug at admission. Seventeen percent cited cocaine as their primary drug, while 6 percent said theirs was marijuana and 5 percent identified heroin.

"Alcohol is legal," Evens said. "But it's still the biggest drug problem we have."

Users — white, young

Furthermore, most users are white and middle class, contrary to the notion that substance abuse is predominately a problem of poor, inner-city blacks.

"A lot of people have that misconception," said Donald L. Retsig, director of Michigan's Office of Drug Agencies. "But the largest percentage of drug users are white, middle-class males."

Indeed, a study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that blacks make up about 12 percent of the nation's drug users. The majority are whites holding responsible jobs in corporate America.

Figures compiled by Oakland's substance abuse program indicate blacks and minorities make up 13.9 percent of those seeking treatment.

The "typical" county drug dealer is also white, according to a profile compiled by NET, the Oakland County Narcotic Enforcement Team, composed of officers from 16 agencies including the Michigan State Police, the Oakland County Sheriff's Department and police departments in Farmington Hills, Southfield, Troy and West Bloomfield.

The NET profile depicts the typical Oakland dealer as single, between 18 and 23, with a full-time job. He lives in the county, but conducts the majority of "deals" away from his community.

Customers are predominantly white and young — sometimes 10 or younger — according to statistics compiled by Oakland's substance abuse program.

Their figures show 90 percent of those seeking treatment for substance abuse said they were 25 or younger when they first tried drugs. Thirty-five percent were between 15 and 17, 23 percent were between 11 and 14 and 4.8 percent were 10 or younger.

No longer a joke

For years, possibly decades, a big part of the drug problem has been a permissive attitude throughout society as a whole. In the 1960s and 1970s, marijuana, speed and others were considered nonaddictive, "recreational" drugs that could be enjoyed in moderation with no ill effects. People joked about drug abuse. Comedian Robin Williams, for example, referred to cocaine as "God's way of saying you make too much money."

Much of that changed, however, with the coming of "crack," a cheaper derivative of cocaine.

As crack became more available, its devastating effects became more obvious. The social and human cost of drug abuse is no longer funny.

Partly because of that growing awareness, tolerance of drug abuse is on the wane, according to Retsig and others.

In Detroit, for example, outraged residents have admitted burning suspected crack houses.

Several youngsters around the state have reported their parents for drug abuse.

Oakland County residents haven't gone that far. But police report a rising tide of anger, resentment and intolerance focusing on drug users and pushers.

School teachers are on the lookout for tell-tale signs of drug abuse among students — and vice versa.

More companies are considering drug screening for job applicants and urine tests for those involved in accidents.

Residents are watching their neighbors, particularly those who have a lot of late-night visitors driving expensive cars.

"We get a lot of calls about suspicious neighbors," said one lieutenant with the Southfield police. "People call if somebody seems to have sudden wealth or a lot of visitors in the middle of the night. And we investigate each one."

RAID!



Police Sgt. Mike Searing diagrams the target for the raid. The briefing includes covering the home's entrances and exits, designating officers to enter the home, and reviewing the fastest routes to hospitals.



photos by DAN DEAN/staff photographer

The raid in progress. A narcotics officer guards the perimeter while other officers secure the inside of the home.

Neighbors view daytime search

By Judith Doner Berne
staff writer

A knock on the door. The words: "Police. Search warrant. Down."

And with that — on a quiet May afternoon — a team of uniformed police and the Oakland County Narcotics Enforcement Team bursts into the modest home of a suspected drug dealer near Haggerty and 12 Mile roads.

A dog is on the lawn. A small American flag waves from the breezeway roof. A Jaguar and late-model T-bird stand in the drive. A neighbor runs inside his home.

It is the 42nd drug raid of 1990 by Oakland County NET.

The agents — with code names like "Gumby," "Bruiser" and "Sluggo" — are hoping to find the suspect at home.

Instead, they find his wife, three children — one a week-old baby — and a male visitor.

They aren't there for the cocaine he is suspected of dealing. They want the financial records to confirm that the suspect laundered drug money through his legitimate business.

"We're looking for papers, personal records," Sgt. Mike Searing explains in the strategy session ahead of the raid. "He is a user — we may find enough cocaine to charge him."

"We won't mess your house up if you show us where they are," they offer his wife. No affirmative response. "She's very hostile to say the least," one officer reports.

So they begin their search, carefully going through clothes and furnishings. When they find their first bit of evidence — a small amount of suspected dope — the search methods change and they ransack the home. "We're extremely neat until we know."

Later, they also find a handgun and some records.

AS THE SEARCH inside continues, neighbors gather in small groups and kids, now home from school, make it a point to ride by on their bikes or to watch from the curb across the street.

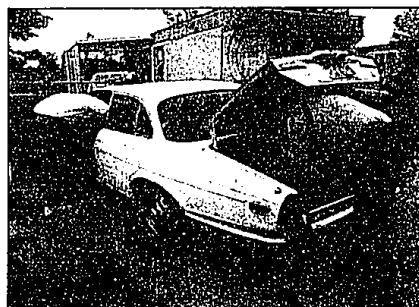
One cop standing guard in the driveway is asked for his autograph.



A uniformed Novi police officer leads the raid team into the home. In the interests of safety, uniformed officers go in first for immediate visual recognition.



Curiosity brings out neighborhood kids, who crowd around the impounded Jaguar.



Part of the raid includes searching the car, which ultimately was confiscated.

CREDITS

More than 20 members of the Observer & Eccentric staff worked for four months to produce this special report and the related stories and photographs which will appear in Thursday's newspaper.

They are: Photographers Dan Dean and Guy Warren from our West Bloomfield and Oakland office and Jim Ryder from Rochester/Troy.

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