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Heroin

It's cheap. it's deadly, and teens think it's no big deal

By Matt Davis



"I got a lot of people started on cocaine. And then a few of my close friends tried heroin. Most of them realized it was stupid and stopped, but others weren't so lucky." — **Arun Rahman**

Photo by Matt Davis

I've spent 11 months of the last two years in jail," says Arun Rahman, who dropped out of one of the area's most expensive private schools two years ago, in his senior year, to try to kick a heroin addiction. It didn't work.

Rahman, 20, talked to *Gambit* in late August, just four days out of a seven-month, court-ordered stay at the Narconon rehabilitation center in Baton Rouge. It cost his parents \$36,000 to send the former National Merit Scholarship finalist there. Meanwhile, his older sister just graduated from Yale and is on a graduate placement in Paris. Rahman used to feel impatient — that he was missing out on many things because of his addiction. Rehab has helped him accept that he must move at his own pace, he says.

Rahman left Benjamin Franklin High School after he was caught selling marijuana in the parking lot. "They (school officials) said they had the right to

expel him, but 'because we know he can make a new beginning, we're not going to put it on his record,'" says Rahman's mother, Zeenat Rasheed. "It was in the middle of exams, so they let him finish his exams and said, 'Please just take him away.'"

Rahman's family did just that. He applied and was admitted to a private school, but his family did not tell the school of his drug history. His academic record earned him a scholarship, but the school had no inkling of Rahman's drug problem. His mother admits they withheld that information from the school, which has a policy of expelling students who use or deal drugs on campus.

No doubt that school would not have admitted Rahman had it known of his drug problems.

Today, Rahman still looks like most high school kids, except for his three jailhouse tattoos — one, a cross, another naming a former girlfriend with whom he broke up because of his addiction, and the last, the sacred symbol for peace or "Om." Even today, bright and articulate, dressed in high-top Nike sneakers, a Ralph Lauren polo shirt and toting a brand new iPhone 4, he hardly looks or seems like a heroin addict. Or does he?

Rahman, who has overdosed three times, admits he is lucky to be alive.

Schools and parents have responded with increased concern and some policy changes, but experts caution that a zero-tolerance message alone may not be enough. Two recent heroin deaths among young New Orleanians send a disturbing message about the renewed availability, popularity and dangers of the drug. High school students can now buy enough heroin to get high for hours for the price of a McDonald's Happy Meal.

Gambit investigated the local heroin problem by interviewing law enforcement officials, rehabilitation experts, school principals, parents and Rahman, a teenage heroin addict himself, to find out what can be done to stop more of the city's youth from dying. The answer requires parents and schools to set aside their anxieties. Parents need to be bolder about talking to their kids about drugs, and schools need to stop being afraid to discuss their drug policies publicly. Most schools contacted in connection with this story, for example, refused to talk on the record for fear of being seen as "soft" on drugs or as "having a drug problem."

According to many experts, every high school has a "drug problem" at some level. Most simply choose not to confront or acknowledge it.

Alcohol and drugs have been part of New Orleans' culture for years, and heroin use has been rife since the drug first arrived here a century ago, with the city initially seeking to regulate it via an ordinance in 1910.

New Orleans piano player Champion Jack Dupre memorialized heroin addiction on his 1941 record "Junker Blues," and William Burroughs' semi-autobiographical book *Junkie* was written after the author moved here in the late 1940s because the drug was easier to obtain. More recently, Shannon Hoon of the band Blind Melon overdosed in his tour bus outside Tipitina's shortly before he was supposed to perform in 1995.

Nationwide, heroin has undergone a resurgence as a new generation of adolescents comes of age without memory of the celebrity heroin deaths that quelled the drug's popularity in the mid-1990s.

"Over the years, heroin has claimed the lives of many," says a video in the lobby of the Drug Enforcement Agency's Target America exhibition at the Old U.S. Mint on Esplanade Avenue. "Billie Holiday, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Sid Vicious, River Phoenix, John Belushi and Kurt Cobain."

Nirvana singer Cobain, the most recent celebrity death on that list (though not the most recent celeb to overdose on heroin), died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound while high on heroin in 1994. Today's 18-year-olds never knew the shock that his suicide caused, and thus many may be more inclined to experiment with the drug that led to it.

"Kids aren't as afraid of heroin as they once were," says Robyn Dewhirst, director of assessment and early intervention at the Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse (CADA) for Greater New Orleans. "The impression is that smoking it is no big deal, and the fear of becoming a proverbial junkie is just not there."

Instead of shooting heroin by injecting a cooked solution of the drug with a syringe, today's teens are more inclined to begin by snorting it — inhaling lines of the powdered drug through their nostrils like cocaine, or smoking it in a variety of ways, says Dewhirst. Ingesting heroin that way reduces somewhat the risk of overdosing — but not the risk of addiction. And if heroin is combined with other drugs such as prescription tranquilizers or painkillers, the risk of overdosing can worsen.

In terms of addictiveness, heroin ranks at the top of the list with crack cocaine. Crack is attractive to users wanting a lift in mood, while heroin is attractive to people with anxiety or racing thoughts who want to come down.

"Heroin can be addictive from its very first use because it gives the absolute peace that people are seeking," Dewhirst says. "And after that, people are always seeking that first high. It's referred to as 'chasing the dragon,' or being 'in the womb' by addicts. It's incomparable, when you're talking to a heroin addict, that first heroin high."

Dewhirst adds that kids today don't realize snorting heroin is as dangerous as shooting it up. "The thought is, 'How much worse can it be than smoking pot or something like that?'"

If they only knew.

Local cops say heroin's resurgence is worse in New Orleans right now than in other areas of the country. They attribute the drug's prevalence here to Hurricane Katrina shaking up local drug distribution networks.

"Prior to Katrina, there were very few conduits bringing in heroin from Houston," says Capt. Bruce Little of the New Orleans Police Department's Specialized Investigations Division. "Post-Katrina, there were a lot more people with a direct pipeline. Now the problem is that the heroin hasn't been stepped on as much, so the purity is much higher and users have no idea of how potent it is."

Retired FBI Special Agent in Charge James Bernazzani, who led the bureau's New Orleans office after Katrina, says the market was flooded with cheap, potent heroin as new dealers tried to gain a foothold in the market. "This very potent Mexican heroin didn't discriminate between white or black, gay, straight, uptown, downtown, or by age," he says.

A new heroin user in New Orleans can now get high for hours for just \$5. A "20-bag," or \$20 worth of heroin, is enough to get a new user high for two days, Rahman says.

By comparison, cocaine is more expensive than heroin. Half a gram of coke, chopped into four or five lines, costs about \$30. Just one line of cocaine is enough for a new user to get high for an hour or so, for about \$6 to \$8 — but a half-gram of the drug is typically gone in a few hours. Many teens are turning to heroin for a cheaper, longer-lasting, more intense high.

Bernazzani helped lock up the dealers responsible for the January 2008 death of Lusher High School student Maddy Prevost. She was one of seven people between the ages of 16 and 27 who died in New Orleans during a five-week period from using the drug.

Supply lines and pricing are not the only aspects of heroin use that have changed in recent years. State lawmakers in 2002 reduced the sentence for heroin possession from life to five years, with the possibility of rehabilitation or probation. That was a stroke of luck for kids like Rahman.

State Sen. Danny Martiny, R-Kenner, a conservative who has received awards from anti-crime groups, helped lead the drug-sentencing reform effort while a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives. Martiny says the idea was to provide parity in sentencing for "possession crimes" between heroin and other drugs while reducing the financial burden on the state for lifetime incarceration of addicts who could otherwise be treated.

"I guess there are those who would argue that because of the change in the sentencing, we encouraged more people to use it," says Martiny, who chairs a Senate committee that deals with criminal statutes. "But that wasn't the intention at all."



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Another new twist to contemporary heroin use is that young people are more likely to combine smoking the drug with abuse of prescription medications. "They really like the Adderall for attention deficit disorder," NOPD's Capt. Little says. "Pain pills, some opiates, tranquilizers — any time you're doing pills in combination with heroin, it's a lethal cocktail."

Statewide, seven people under the age of 18 have died from overdoses of

opiates or opiate derivatives since 2005, according to statistics obtained from the Jefferson Parish Coroner's Office. Those deaths coincide with a spike in adult heroin deaths after Katrina. Adult heroin deaths spiked from 25 in 2005 to 163 in 2006; they fell only slightly over the last three years to 111 in 2009.

Rahman first tried marijuana at 13. He started taking Vicodin, codeine and Ecstasy at 14. At 15 he tried cocaine, and by 16 he was selling it to finance a \$100-a-day habit. At 17, he tried heroin — and didn't look back.

"I got a lot of people started on cocaine," he says. "And then a few of my close friends tried heroin. Most of them realized it was stupid and stopped, but others weren't so lucky. There were always things I said I'd never do. Until eighth grade I said I'd never do weed. Then it was, 'I'd never do pills.' Then it was, 'I'd never smoke crack.' Then, 'I'd never do heroin.' Then, 'I wouldn't shoot it up.'"

By age 17, says Rahman, he was injecting the drug every day, at school in the bathrooms, in the library when nobody was looking, in the bathroom of the coffee shop where he met with *Gambit*, and everywhere in between.

"The kids I was in high school with who said they never would have done it, some of them are still doing it now. They're sophomores in college," Rahman says. "It's just crazy that they would even have started. They come from good families. They're rich, they have good friends, they did decently in high school. They all seemed so locked down."

Rahman expresses mixed emotions about how his heroin addiction has affected him and those around him — regret for things he has done as well as detachment from the past, so that he can look forward to being drug-free.

Rahman also admits he was responsible for other kids using drugs. But, again, he expresses mixed feelings. "I used to think I was the one responsible for them using, but this last time when I went to rehab, I came out and a lot of those kids were way worse off than they were when I went in," he says.

Rahman's mother says she was shocked to discover her son had a heroin problem. "Arun was the one who looked as though he was fine," she says. "He always handled everything. His sister was the one who said, 'I can't cope, I can't handle this.' That's a practical note to parents — always make sure that all your children are getting as much attention."

The recent heroin overdose of an 18-year-old high school graduate and reports on the heroin overdose of the son of a St. Tammany Parish judge renew

concerns that may have been waning since Prevost's death in 2008.

The 18-year-old was expelled from a New Orleans Catholic high school near the end of his junior year, in March 2009, after he failed a drug test for marijuana as part of the school's drug awareness and prevention program. The student later graduated from a Jefferson Parish public high school before overdosing on heroin in mid-July.

"I guess he just got involved in the wrong crowd," says a close friend, who knew him since fifth grade. "I knew he wasn't on heroin long. Supposedly he wasn't getting the good stuff, then he got some and it killed him."

The skeletal remains of 28-year-old Richard A. Swartz III, son of state district Judge Richard Swartz Jr., were discovered in Mississippi Aug. 8. A man arrested while driving Swartz's car told police Swartz died in late July after overdosing on heroin bought in New Orleans. Judge Swartz did not respond to a request for comment.

"My sophomore year, I spent like three hours a day in the bathroom," Rahman says. "I'd sit there and cut up lines of coke on the little toilet (paper) dispenser. And then before class, so I wouldn't come down, I'd drink a gram of coke in some water or something."

Rahman says he would take advantage of free periods at school and forge notes from his mother so he could go out and get high or score drugs off campus.

"People just don't think of heroin as [being] as big a thing as they used to," he says. "Everyone I thought was cool was all right with it. I don't want to sound stereotypical and say I did it because I wanted to feel cool, but in some sense it was, because it made me feel cool. I mean, that's kind of lame, but there it is."

"I don't think [the school] realized," Rahman's mother says of his high school. "They have a wonderful group of people there who talk to the kids about drugs and everything. I can't blame the high school. I don't want to look at it in the past. I want to say, 'Since this is a problem, let's look at it.'"

Professor John Mason of Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine supervised research into the heroin-related deaths of high school and college students after the rash of overdoses in January 2008. He made some significant findings.

"First, the problem isn't only heroin in the schools, it's that people don't

understand the danger of mixing it with other drugs," Mason says.

Heroin overdoses occur when the drug shuts down the respiratory center in a user's brain, he says. That's much more likely to happen when heroin is combined with a host of prescription medications, from antihistamines to tranquilizers. "Second, research suggests that the treatment for an overdose of this kind is relatively simple," Mason says. "An injection of nalaxone, which goes by the brand name Narcan, will save a patient's life.

"Lastly, we need to let high school and college students know that it's possible to save the life of a friend who may be overdosing," Mason says. "We need to say, 'If you're worried about one of your friends, call this number.' And we need to make sure they can do that in a way that assures them they won't be prosecuted."

Which is where Mason's research runs into a brick wall in New Orleans.

"As you try to advise people on particularly risky behavior, you may inadvertently encourage the perception that mere risky behavior is acceptable, or less risky," he says.

And that's a big no-no.

The difficulty for parents and schools is how best to talk about drugs without encouraging the perception that they expect teens to experiment with them. Many parents have grown accustomed to thinking their children were protected from the worst perils of drug addiction by social class or other demographic factors. For them, it boils down to this: Whether to discuss drug use at all, or to simply advocate for a "just don't do it" blanket policy that leaves adolescents to figure things out for themselves.

Most seem to choose the latter option, which Mason argues could be putting lives at risk.

"I just think we're ignoring the problem of drugs as a society and hoping it will go away and not affect us," says Rahman's mother. "There are drugs in the jails. These people are under our authority, so why are they there?"

While most high schools adhere to a strict "zero tolerance" policy when it comes to alcohol and illegal drugs on campus or at school activities, many also have learned valuable lessons about drug education from the rash of heroin deaths in 2008.

"Do I think we have a heroin problem at Lusher High School?" Principal Kathy Reidlinger asks. "No. But after the jolt we had with Maddy Prevost, we put many things into place — both positive programs for kids, and pretty strict consequences for anybody who breaks the law."

Reidlinger adds that while Lusher students are unlikely to be exposed to heroin or drugs at the school, she believes all kids of high school age are increasingly being exposed to a wide range of risky behaviors outside school. The key, she says, is to focus on developing self-esteem and resistance to peer pressure. Lusher's curriculum now includes extensive education about drug abuse, Reidlinger says.

The school also has a proactive policy aimed at deterring drug use — and holding students accountable when they violate that policy. Kids at Lusher who are caught talking about drugs or making plans involving drugs are put on academic probation and given a health intervention and a second chance before expulsion. Kids caught using, possessing or selling drugs on campus are expelled and referred to the police.

No doubt many public, private and parochial high schools in the area take a similar approach, but many are afraid even to discuss their drug policies — for fear they might be seen as having a "drug problem."



"The one rule I learned as a parent is that if they tell you they're not doing something, they probably are." — **Peter Scharf, a professor at Tulane University**

Photo by George Long

Gambit called more than 20 private and Catholic high schools, as well as public school systems in New Orleans, in connection with this story. We asked each the same questions: Are you aware of any heroin use by students? How many drug-related expulsions have you had in the last school year? And what policies are in place concerning drug use by students?

Eleven of the schools did not even return our calls, though many private and parochial high schools post their drug abuse policies on their websites.

Of the high schools who spoke to *Gambit* for this story, zero-tolerance policies were claimed by Franklin, Academy of the Sacred Heart, Holy Cross, Jesuit, Brother Martin, Xavier University Preparatory High School, Mount Carmel and Immaculata.

Even the term zero-tolerance can be nuanced, however. For example, most if not all schools will expel a student who brings drugs onto campus or to a school event, or who is caught manufacturing or selling drugs anywhere. However, a school's zero-tolerance policy may also allow a student who has merely experimented with drugs once or twice off campus, or who is overheard talking about drugs, or who turns to school officials for help, to enter a program that combines random drug testing with appropriate levels of CADA-sponsored counseling and intervention. Once in the program, students are subject to random drug tests and can be expelled if they fail subsequent drug tests. Most schools also offer educational programs for parents as well as students.

Many just don't want to talk publicly about their efforts.

Jesuit High School President Rev. Tony McGinn gives new Jesuit parents a blunt message about alcohol and drugs at the beginning of every academic year. In his presentation, McGinn admonishes parents to forbid even casual beer drinking at home by their sons. He goes so far as to tell parents who serve beer at home to their own or other people's sons to pull their boys out of Jesuit — and he will refund them a full year's tuition. A copy of the speech is available as an MP3 on the school's website (www.jesuitnola.org/jesdata/pdf/Town%20Hall%20Meeting_FrMcGinnAudio.mp3).

"They're afraid of you," McGinn says in last year's speech. "They respect you, and we urge you to keep that relationship."

Many high schools post their student handbooks and drug policies online. Holy Cross High School's website and handbook warn that any student who "manufactures, possesses, furnishes, uses or sells alcohol, narcotics, or any other illegal drugs, drug paraphernalia, or intoxicants at any time shall be subject to severe disciplinary action, including expulsion."

(www.holycrosstigers.com/handbook). The policy statement goes on to note that students' lockers may be searched, students may be required to undergo drug testing, and students may be required to participate in professional assessment,

treatment and testing programs in order to remain enrolled at the school. Brother Martin High School's website and student handbook contain similar language.

None of the Catholic high schools would speak to *Gambit* on the record for this story, however. Archdiocesan spokesperson Sarah Comiskey McDonald emailed all Catholic high schools in the area two weeks ago, repeating the questions posed by *Gambit* in its initial phone calls and asking them to respond to her so she could amalgamate their responses.

As of Sept. 8, McDonald reported that only about half the schools had replied — despite a request from Archbishop Gregory Aymond that they cooperate with *Gambit's* requests for information on school drug policies — and none disclosed expelling any students for drugs. Sources at several Catholic high schools later confirmed to *Gambit* privately that their institutions had expelled students in the previous academic year for drugs, but all refused to talk on the record.

"Most have in place some form of random drug testing for students," McDonald said of the Catholic schools' policies. "Most high schools post their handbooks online either on the school website or through a parent portal such as Edline. Parents and students sign off on having read the handbook at the beginning of each school year."

Country Day, a private school in Old Metairie, has a policy of expelling any student caught supplying or using drugs at school, according to Upper School Principal Howard Barton. Students who are caught under the influence of drugs or alcohol are suspended for five days for a first offense, and expelled for a second offense, he says.

"Like all schools, we take the welfare of our students very seriously," wrote Barton in an emailed statement. Like many other schools, Country Day also offers counseling and educational opportunities for students with chemical dependency issues.

Louise S. McGehee, an all-girls private school in the Garden District, brings in outside professionals every year from Freedom from Chemical Dependency, an international nonprofit that has worked with schools for three decades to reduce drug abuse, to talk to students, parents and faculty. "We take seriously our responsibility to support our students in making good, healthy and lawful decisions," says McGehee headmistress Eileen Powers. "Our substance abuse policy is clearly stated in our handbook, but perhaps more importantly, our policy is supported by a highly effective honor code that defines the culture of the school, close faculty-student relationships and a close line of communication

with parents. ... Being a small, all-girls school allows us to cultivate this positive school culture."

Among public schools, only Lusher and Franklin discussed details of their proactive drug education or counseling programs with *Gambit*.

Franklin expelled two students last year for marijuana possession, says Principal Dr. Timothy Rusnak, one of the few principals to discuss drug-related expulsions in response to *Gambit's* inquiry. Two students withdrew from Lusher last year for marijuana use, Reidlinger says.

Meanwhile, the Recovery School District (RSD) reported it had expelled 68 of its 12,000 students last year for drugs, according to spokesman Ken Jones, who noted the RSD likewise has a zero-tolerance policy. Jones did not mention counseling or drug education in response to *Gambit's* questions.

The Orleans Parish School Board and the Algiers Charter Schools Association did not respond to *Gambit's* requests for comment.

In addition to school-based educational and counseling programs, parents need to watch their kids more carefully, says Tulane University Professor Peter Scharf, a colleague of Mason's at the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

"This is a social networking phenomenon. It's like Facebook or Twitter," Scharf says. "We need an early warning system not just for the Nancy Reagan shit about 'Is your child smoking pot?' but, 'Is your child managing depression with a variety of street or prescription drugs?'"

"The one rule I learned as a parent is that if they tell you they're not doing something, they probably are."

Rahman admits as much.

"We used to have this thing where we'd tell parents we'd done something less than what we'd done so they'd believe us if we got caught," Rahman says. "Like we'd say we'd been drinking or smoking weed. So I was shooting heroin with this one girl and her mom caught us, and she said, 'It's OK, Mom, I was just snorting some heroin.' And in her state of mind, that made a weird sort of sense."

The girl's mother hit the roof, of course.

Her daughter didn't mention that Rahman had been giving her CPR just

moments earlier — in an effort to revive her from an apparent overdose.

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