

Heroin starts as fields of beautiful-colored poppies. Poppies can be grown in cool plateaus above 500 feet. The plants grow rapidly and propagate easily. Planted at the end of the wet season (in Asia, that's in September and October), the poppy heads are later scraped after the petals fall off. The scraping creates an oozing sap that is removed from the plant and packed tightly into banana leaves. Naturally it doesn't make sense to do all this intensive work in Manhattan or Beverly Hills, so heroin, like coffee and cotton, is a slavery crop. Cheap labor, back-breaking work, and entire families eking out an existence is the general rule for opium farmers. The crude opium is then transported out of the hills via pony or armed convoys to middlemen. Even for those who grow opium, few escape its enticing lure. Hill-tribe growers swiftly become addicts themselves. Up to 30 percent of Southeast Asia's Hmong tribe is addicted to opium. Most of the income of northern Laos is dope money. In fact, small nickel bags, or parakeets as they are called locally, can be used as a form of currency.

Wars have been fought over opium since the 1839 to 1842 Opium War between Britain and China. Today, the battles are taking place on the streets of London, Moscow, Beijing, and even small-town America. Crime experts say that as turf battles among drug lords decline in the cities, America's small towns are becoming the fastest-growing markets. A recent survey found that 47 percent of small-town police chiefs consider drugs a serious problem and two-thirds say drug problems in their area have increased over the last five years. Millions of people are currently enslaved by the byproducts of the opium poppy. And today's heroin's slaves aren't just junkies in back alleys. The media recently has had a field day exposing heroin-addicted movie stars and fashion models. Since the drug can now be snorted like cocaine or smoked rather than injected into veins, and is often used with cocaine to ease the crash, it has begun increasing in popularity.

If you believe the White House, "Club Heroin" includes 3,054,000 Americans who admitted (on a government survey . . . uh, yeah, George, we'll just tick off "Hard-drug user," okay!) to using heroin in their lifetime. Only .1 percent said they used it in the last 30 days. (Funny how they don't get a lot of government surveys filled out in alleys and crack houses.) Down at the morgue, where it's both easy and hard to lie straight, the numbers tell a different story: 41 percent of drug-related deaths in metropolitan areas were linked to heroin or morphine.

The government also estimates that heroin is a \$12 billion business in the United States and that there might be just under a million junkies out there. The current purity of heroin found on the street in the United States has jumped from an average of 7 percent in 1984 to

36 percent today, a testament not only to its grip on a nation, but to the seemingly endless world supply of the narcotic. Heroin shipped into the United States comes from at least 11 different countries. The DEA estimates it stops 30 to 40 percent of drugs illegally entering the country.

The Golden Crescent

Afghanistan had a massive increase in poppy cultivation in the late '90s under the Talibs. It put the country at the top of the list of heroin suppliers and then, poof!, the poppies vanished. Not so much due to the ban on opium cultivation but due more to a deadly drought that made poppies almost impossible to grow.

The bad news is that poppies are hoppin'. In 2002, 30,750 hectares were under cultivation—only half the size of the biggest year's crop, but enough to reestablish Afghanistan as the champs. Most (84 percent) poppies are grown in five southern and eastern provinces. Each hectare will yield 41 kilograms of opium. The 2002 crop is expected to generate over \$1 billion at the farmers' level, with prices between \$160 and \$180 a pound. The United States is investing \$75 million to combat the growth in opium production.

Although the Taliban is against the consumption of drugs, it used to tolerate the growing of poppies. In the late '90s the Talib government was estimated to pull in between \$10 and \$75 million from the taxation of opium.

Most opium transport is via Baluchi trafficking organizations operating out of Quetta, Pakistan. These groups place orders with the Afghani processors and arrange for shipment of the drugs from Afghanistan through Pakistan and to Iranian or Turkish buyers, who move it through Iran and into international drug channels. Most Afghan opium is destined for processing into heroin in Turkey to be sold in the main cities of Western Europe.

Latin America

Heroin also is an up-and-coming crop in Colombia and Mexico. Forget exotic camel trains, couriers with condoms shoved up nasty places, rusting Chinese cargo ships, or even sweaty tourists at crossing points. Colombia's pure white heroin comes into the United States directly by commercial air, delivered FedEx-style to Miami and L.A. The Mexican "black tar" heroin usually comes over in commercial truck and via entrepreneurs.