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Up in Smoke

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Developing a Crack Index

If you rely on the news media for your information, you probably think that crack cocaine is a thing of the past. If you rely on data, however, you reach a different conclusion.

Measuring the use and impact of a drug like crack isn't easy. There is no government Web site to provide crack data, and surveying dealers is bound to be pretty unreliable. So how can you get to the truth of crack use? One way is to look at a variety of imperfect but plausible proxies, including cocaine arrests, emergency-room visits and deaths. Unlike the volume of news coverage, the rates for all of these remain shockingly high. Cocaine arrests, for instance, have fallen only about 15 percent since the crack boom of the late 1980's. Cocaine-related deaths are actually higher now; so are the number of emergency-room visits due to cocaine. When combined in a sensible way, these proxies can be used to construct a useful index of crack.

And what does this index reveal? That crack use was nonexistent until the early 1980's and spiked like mad in 1985, peaking in 1989. That it arrived early on the West Coast, but became most prevalent in the cities of the Northeast and Middle Atlantic States. And that it produced a remarkable level of gun violence, particularly among young black men, who made up the bulk of street-level crack dealers. During the crack boom, the homicide rate among 13- to 17-year-old blacks nearly quintupled. But perhaps the biggest surprise in the crack index is the fact that, as of 2000 -- the most recent year for which the index data are available -- Americans were still smoking about 70 percent as much crack as they smoked when consumption was at its peak.

If so much crack is still being sold and bought, why aren't we hearing about it? Because crack-associated violence has largely disappeared. And it was the violence that made crack most relevant to the middle class. What made the violence go away? Simple economics. Urban street gangs were the main distributors of crack cocaine. In the beginning, demand for their product was phenomenal, and so were the potential profits. Most crack killings, it turns out, were not a result of some crackhead sticking up a grandmother for drug money but rather one crack dealer shooting another -- and perhaps a few bystanders -- in order to gain turf.

But the market changed fast. The destructive effects of the drug became apparent; young people saw the damage that crack inflicted on older users and began to stay away from it. (One recent survey showed that crack use is now three times as common among people in their late 30's as it is among those in their late teens and early 20's.) As demand fell, price wars broke out, driving down profits. And as the amount of money at stake grew smaller and smaller, the violence also dissipated. Young gang members are still selling crack on street corners, but when a corner becomes less valuable, there is less incentive to kill, or be killed, for it.

So how can it be that crack consumption is still so high? Part of the answer may have to do with geography. The index shows that consumption is actually up in states far from the coasts, like Arizona, Minnesota, Colorado and Michigan.

But the main answer lies in the same price shift that made the crack trade less violent. The price has fallen about 75 percent from its peak, which has led to an interesting consumption pattern: there are far fewer users, but they are each smoking more crack. This, too, makes perfect economic sense. If you are a devoted crackhead and the price is one-fourth what it used to be, you can afford to smoke four times as much.

But as crack has matured into a drug that causes less social harm, the laws punishing its sale have stayed the same. In 1986, in the national frenzy that followed the death of Len Bias, a first-round N.B.A. draft pick and a cocaine user, Congress passed legislation requiring a five-year mandatory sentence for selling just five grams of crack; you would have to sell 500 grams of powder cocaine to get an equivalent sentence. This disparity has often been called racist, since it disproportionately imprisons blacks.

In fact, the law probably made sense at the time, when a gram of crack did have far more devastating social costs than a gram of powder cocaine. But it doesn't anymore. Len Bias would now be 40 years old, and he would have long outlived his usefulness to the Boston Celtics. It may be time to acknowledge that the law inspired by his death has done the same.

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