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## Heroin Addiction in the 1950s

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**NOTE:** The original 1,000+ page manuscript for *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* had to be cut by more than half before its first publication in 1998. This is an edited excerpt that was deleted from the original manuscript.

Narcotic addiction had so dramatically declined during World War II that the Bureau of Narcotics planned to make a final push of intensified enforcement to eliminate America's drug problem. The Bureau continued to boast in the 1950s that the number of narcotic addicts in the U.S. had shrunk to its lowest level in modern history. According to their estimates, the number of addicts in the U.S. had shrunk from 500,000 in 1914, to 250,000 before World War II and to an all-time low estimate of 34,729 in 1957--half of whom were thought to be living in New York City (Speer, 1958). While an estimated one third of prisoners entering federal penitentiaries in 1928 were addicted, Harry Anslinger could report in 1953 that the number of narcotics addicts entering federal prisons had dropped to 7.8 percent of admissions. He also noted another 1.4 percent were "marihuana addicts" (Anslinger & Tompkins, 1953, p. 194).

These figures defied the fact that narcotic addiction was rising in the years following World War II. Admissions of

addicts to the federal narcotics hospital in Lexington increased from 2700 in 1941 to 4500 in 1950, and cities like Chicago organized Narcotics Bureaus within their police departments to respond to increased narcotic addiction (Weston, 1952). Later retrospective studies would confirm the rise of heroin epidemics in the early 1950s in such cities as New York City and Chicago (Senay, 1989).

### A Changing Addict Profile

There were changes in the number, age and ethnicity of narcotic addicts in the early 1950s. The number of addicts increased as their age decreased. America saw its first real epidemic of teenage heroin use during this period as rites of passage into manhood for young men in the urban ghettos shifted from street fighting to the "cool pose" of the drug-sophisticated (Finestone, 1957, Preble & Casey, 1969; Sutter, 1966; Krivanek, 1988).

Heroin use rose in tandem with increased heroin trafficking and changing

social conditions following the close of World War II. Heroin became THE drug of choice in the illicit urban drug culture. When heroin was unobtainable, addicts fell back on legal narcotics. The latter included morphine, synthetic narcotics such as demerol, and over-the-counter opiate preparations that were then legally available such as paregoric (tincture of opium) and codeine-laced cough medicines such as Robitussin A-C and Romilar.

The trend of increased heroin use in poor African American and Latino communities that had begun before the war continued. Actually, heroin was in the same neighborhoods it had always been in, but who lived in those neighborhoods had changed. Addiction, as William Burroughs once noted is a "disease of exposure," and those being exposed in the 1950s changed as neighborhoods changed. The ethnic composition of American narcotic addicts changed in tandem with the ethnic composition of America's urban slums. As White ethnic groups moved their way toward the suburbs, they reduced their exposure to heroin and to a climate that made its use attractive. What they left behind were communities of color containing young men and women vulnerable to addiction. Heroin arrived in the African American community in the form of what Claude Brown, in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, described as the "shit plague" that hit Harlem and other New York neighborhoods in the early 1950s. Equally vivid accounts of the rise of heroin addiction among Puerto Rican youth in East Harlem during the 1950s can be found in such works as Dan Wakefield's *Island in the City*.

While ethnicity had changed, many characteristics of heroin addicts had not. They were primarily young unattached men who joined together to seek pleasure and create meaning in a world that presented them with few alternatives. They lived in overcrowded neighborhoods. They lived in neighborhoods where drugs were easily available. They lived in neighborhoods that working people shared with pimps, prostitutes and all manner of hustlers. They lived in neighborhoods where vice provided an alternative career path and a potential

means of achieving money and status. Second generation African Americans arriving in Northern cities from the South and second generation immigrants from Puerto Rico and Mexico were as vulnerable to addiction in the urban slum as the second generation European immigrants had been arriving in these same neighborhoods in earlier decades.

The changing profile of the American narcotic addict was evident in the characteristics of those admitted to the federal narcotics hospital in Lexington in the years 1936 and 1955. African American admissions rose from 8.9 percent in 1936 to 52 percent in 1955. The admission of Chinese and Jewish addicts significantly decreased between these two periods. Where only 16.5 percent of admissions in 1936 were aged 19 or under, 45 percent of 1955 admissions were in this category. There was also greater criminality revealed in the 1955 study with 30 percent of admissions having a criminal record prior to the onset of their drug use (Lowry, 1956). A similar study notes the rise in Latino addicts during this period. Only 1% of addict admissions to Lexington were Latino in 1936. In 1966, 14% of admissions were Puerto Rican and 12% were Mexican (Helmer, 1975).

### **Public Images of Heroin Addiction in the 1950s**

The drug that took center stage in newspapers, magazines, literature and cinema of the 1950s was, as might be expected, heroin. Other drugs garnered little attention and even the sparse treatment of marihuana in the media focused on its link to heroin. Sensationalist movies like *High School Confidential* (1958), *The Cool and the Crazy* (1958) and *Stakeout on Dope Street* (1958) all portrayed the theme that marihuana use led inextricably to heroin addiction.

The portrayal of the addict differed according to the particular media. While newspapers and magazines were shifting visual images and written accounts to reflect the young African American or Latino male

addict, other media continued to portray an earlier addict profile. Movies of the 1950s, such as *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1956), *Bigger than Life* (1956) *Monkey on My Back* (1957), *A Hatful of Rain* (1957), and *The Gene Krupa Story* (1958) pictured the addict as a young, White male. Addicted women were still hidden from public view both in reality and within the cultural media. The exception to this rule would occur in a few years when Katherine Hepburn would give one of the most powerful portrayals of addiction in the history of film in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962).

Perhaps the ultimate 1950s cinematic archetype of the addict was Frank Sinatra's portrayal of Frankie Machine, the young poker-playing hustler drawn from Nelson Algren's 1939 novel, *The Man with the Golden Arm*. When most American's in the 1950s thought of addiction, their minds flashed to images of Sinatra's ten-minute withdrawal scene in the movie. The portrayal of the addict in the 1950s cinema belied the fact that heroin addiction was changing--a fact that would be apparent in only a few years in movies like *The Connection* (1961), *The Cool World* (1963), and *Panic in Needle Park* (1971, Taqi, 1973). The literature of the period also portrayed the addict as a White male. Foremost among these works were two 1953 self-confessional books: William Burrough's *Junkie* and Leroy Street's *I was a Drug Addict*.

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