

SMOKE TRAILS

Tracing crack cocaine from Guelph streets to the drug's source



People addicted to crack cocaine lead tortured lives dominated by short highs — about 20 minutes — followed by an overpowering need for another hit. Often, they are destitute and resort to crime to get the next high — available thanks to an international supply line.

Crack cocaine is sold on Guelph streets by dealers who work out of their homes or addicts' homes, using runners to sell the highly-addictive drug. There are an estimated 200 of these dealers in Guelph.



The key sources for Guelph dealers are about 15 higher-level dealers from Toronto who set up business in apartments or hotels. They typically sell one-ounce crack rocks.

The dealers from Toronto are supplied by dealers higher on the drug food chain who acquire cocaine bricks imported into the country — usually by biker gangs — and cook the cocaine in ammonia, or mix it with baking soda and oil for cooking. The result is rock-like crack.



Cocaine bricks are smuggled into Canada through port cities as well as small and large airports, including Pearson International in Toronto.



Cocaine arriving in Canada comes mainly from Colombia, where the coca plant is harvested, turned to cocaine powder and then processed into one-kilogram bricks for shipment.



Source:
Guelph Police

HOW THE DEAL GOES DOWN



DAVE CARTER, GUELPH MERCURY

Crack dealer Craig McCue, 32, was drawn into the life by the promise of easy money, but the cash comes with a cost. For McCue that cost is a life on the run from both the police and other dealers.

'Guelph has a serious crack problem. I didn't know how bad it was in this town until I got involved.'

By DEIRDRE HEALEY
MERCURY STAFF

GUELPH

Craig McCue has spent many sleepless nights staring at his apartment door with a steel baseball bat gripped in his hands.

He is always on edge.

The Guelph man has been stabbed with a screwdriver, had the barrel of a gun pressed against his head and come home to find the words "you are a dead man" scratched into his front door.

It's all part of living in Guelph's dangerous underground world of crack-cocaine dealers.

"We call it the game," McCue said. "In this game, it's every man for himself."

The 32-year-old was bringing in more than \$1,500 a day playing "the game" and using some of that money to pay for his own habit. But the police caught up with him just over three months ago, when he was arrested downtown and charged with trafficking.

He is currently out on bail and spoke to the Mercury in April about his experience in the drug world just after his arrest. Recent attempts to contact him have failed.

McCue has spent most of his life in and out of jail. His criminal record dates back to when he was 14. First he stole his neighbour's motorcycle, and then his crimes escalated to include break-ins, frauds and now drug charges.

He managed to get his life on track about a year ago, holding down a job at a local water purification plant. He took the bus to work and made just enough money to pay the rent and go out drinking with his friends on weekends.

But he wanted more.

One Saturday night, McCue had a couple of friends over for beers and watched in awe as his friend made deal after deal on his cellphone.

"He must have dealt with 15 or 16 people and in the course of an hour this guy made 900 bucks. It was quick money. My first thought was 'How can I get into this?'"

McCue immediately pawned his stereo and television to pay for a ball — 3.5 grams of crack that can be sold for as much as \$350 on the street.

Crack is derived from cocaine. The cocaine powder is mixed with ammonia and cooked down to form potent rocks, which are smoked.

McCue learned how to break up the chalky white chunks and then cheat his customers by shaving minuscule amounts off before packaging them up.

He knew the customers he was dealing with can't afford scales.

To build up a steady clientele, he made business cards by ripping a cigarette package into tiny squares, jotting his cellphone number on the pieces of paper and handing them out to people wandering the downtown in search of a fix.

"It is such an easy place to deal because there are so many people using," he said. "Guelph has a serious crack problem. I didn't know how bad it was in this town until I got involved."

Guelph Police Constable Ben Bair has spent four years in the drug unit chasing crack dealers.

At one time, he knew all the major dealers in the city, but there are too many to keep track of now.

"We are seeing people coming in from larger centres to deal crack here," Bair said. "And we are seeing larger amounts of crack coming in. We used to catch people with an ounce, but now we are finding people with as much as nine ounces, which is close to \$27,000."

Just weeks after he jumped into the business of drug dealing, McCue was sought out by high rollers in Toronto who wanted him to tap into the Guelph market for them.

Eventually, he was dealing to more than 60 local crack addicts a day.

There was no turning back.

He said his supplier, known only by a nickname, would drop into Guelph a couple times a week to give McCue product.

"It was nothing to start with a half an ounce at 6 a.m. and

by 1 a.m. the next morning to have \$4,000 cash," McCue said. "The money is phenomenal."

Addicts were handing him their mother's engagement rings or cologne they stole from department stores to pay for a hit. Women were offering sexual favours in exchange for the drug.

He was answering calls at all hours, spending \$300 a day on cab fares to make deals across the city and setting up drop-offs at different locations downtown — spots where he knew he could deal without being seen by the cops.

"I walk downtown now and I don't see the downtown I used to see. Now I can walk downtown and point out 30 crack heads at one time because I have dealt with them. Unless you are immersed in the lifestyle or know someone immersed in the lifestyle, you would never see it. But it's everywhere."

McCue said Toronto dealers prey on Guelph because they know they won't get caught.

"There is no real steady supply here. It's always coming from out of town and Guelph is a very soft town when it comes to police involvement with drugs," McCue said. "There are not a lot of drug busts. People think they can get away with it."

The chance of getting caught is even slimmer when you aren't from the city, he said.

"They pop in for a day and then disappear back to Toronto. The cops can't track them down."

The bigger dealers will keep a low profile when they come to Guelph to drop off drugs and pick up cash by driving to the city in rented cars, using a fake name and staying in a hotel room for the night.

Dealers from larger cities are making the trip and feeding on Guelph addicts because the city's drug scene remains unclaimed, Bair said.

"There is no ruling force," he said. "We used to be a mafia city, but that has died down. Right now we are up for grabs. Someone coming into Guelph to sell drugs doesn't have to worry about being forced out."

Recently the drug has begun seeping into local high schools and latching on to teenagers.

It's common for students to start becoming involved in a drug when it reaches a price range of \$10 or \$20, Bair said.

"It's a bad sign when the price starts to drop to the \$20 range because it means it is getting into the schools," he said. "Young teenagers don't have \$40 to drop on drugs, but they have \$10 or \$20."

Often dealers will "front" a teenager a hit of crack cocaine and tell them to pay them later in the day or in the week, he said.

That way the teenager gets hooked and they have created another customer.

But "fronting" can be dangerous because it is often followed by violence if the teenager doesn't pay up, Bair said.

"If you are fronting you are collecting, and dealers will often hire collectors to go after people. Crack cocaine is a business. They don't give it out for free."

Violence is intertwined with the drug world.

Local crack dealers are near the bottom of the drug ladder and also have dealers and collectors above them hunting them down if they don't pay up, Bair said.

"There are a lot more assaults, robberies and home invasions happening that don't ever get reported because they involve drugs."

During his short time in the drug world, McCue said he has been visited by several collectors.

"If you screw your dealer over, they will bring someone in from Toronto to beat the crap out of you," McCue said. "He won't dirty his hands. He will get someone else to do it."

They show up at his apartment in the middle of the night, often with a key to his front door. All he can do is sit and wait with a steel baseball bat ready in his hands.

TAKING THE HIT

A five-part series on Guelph's crack scourge