

Seven drug deaths in Scotland over Christmas

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5 January 2000

In a few days over the Christmas period, seven young people in the West of Scotland died because of drug overdoses. Natasha Gartley, Derek Ritchie, Michael McGorry, Andrew Drummond and David Rae were all from the Glasgow area. The youngest, Kerry-Ann Kirk from Coatbridge, was only 15 years old. Reports suggest that her death was the result of an experiment, or even a prank, involving methadone, the heroin substitute, taken from a brother of one of her friends after a Christmas party. The death of 23-year-old David Rennie, from the Grampian region, is also thought to be drug related.

These individual tragedies, each producing immense pain and misery for the victim's friends and families, bring the total number of drug-related deaths in the Strathclyde region this year to 146. It is likely that last year's fatality total will exceed the 276 who died in 1998 in Scotland as a whole. Throughout Britain there were 700 drug-related deaths in 1997.

In Glasgow, a city of around 650,000 people, there are estimated to be between 8,000 and 10,000 regular heroin users. Earlier last year, 23-year-old Hugh McCartney, the son of Westminster MP Ian McCartney, was found dead in a derelict flat in the city's Parkhead area. In 1998, a 13-year-old boy was found dead in the Cranhill area. Both died from heroin overdoses.

In 1997-98, 8,573 people registered for drug treatment in Scotland, 70 percent of these in the Glasgow and Edinburgh areas. Of these, 60 percent reported heroin as their preferred drug and another 20 percent reported methadone. In the whole of Britain, in the six months up to September 1998, 28,599 people registered for drug-related treatment—a 17 percent increase on the previous year. Of these, 42 percent were under 25 years of age; 56 percent reported heroin as the problem drug and 11 percent methadone.

Although impacting on many different social layers,

heroin use is a symptom of poverty and alienation, particularly amongst young people. Fully 69 percent of Scottish registered problem drug users have been unemployed for more than one year. (No figures are compiled for the UK as a whole). Sixteen percent of these individuals have never had a job; 63 percent started "problematic" use under the age of 19; 27 percent were either awaiting trial or sentence, or had court cases pending. Of people in prison, about 20 percent used heroin and nearly half had "problematic" drug use.

Even in some relatively prosperous rural areas, such as the small fishing village of Fraserburgh, as many as one in three of those under 21 years of age are regular heroin users. A 1999 report suggested that 75 percent of heroin overdoses in the town involved working fishermen. The traditional "binge" culture of hard alcohol drinking has been replaced by heroin use. Fishing, particularly in conditions when much of the North Sea has been systematically over-fished, is particularly demanding and dangerous work and the entire industry has little future.

The official response to the dramatic escalation of heroin either ignores or merely doffs its hat to the social decay that gives rise to the problem. Its focus is primarily based on a police clampdown. Donald Dewar, the Scottish First Minister, recently announced proposals for a Drugs Enforcement Agency to employ 200 more police officers. An indication of the type of work envisaged can be seen in the recent police Operation Spotlight. A massive clampdown on working class areas was launched in October 1998. Within three months, 1,348 people had been arrested for alleged drug supply offences and 3,752 for minor charges relating to possession of cannabis. Another purge in September led to the arrest of 572 people on drug-related charges.

According to Mike Cadger of the Crew 2000

voluntary group in Edinburgh, 62 percent of state spending on drugs was directed to repression, compared to 25 percent on treatment, and only 10 percent on prevention. In Scotland, 80 percent of spending goes to the police, courts and prison. Last year the courts processed 31,500 drug cases in Scotland, 22,600 of which were for simple possession, mostly of cannabis.



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