

CHANGING INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC HEROIN PATTERNS

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During the last decade the source regions, transportation routes and even areas of domestic consumption of heroin have been changing. Shifts within the United States reflect, to some extent, a reorientation of international supplies. By 1972 and 1973, there was an addiction decline in the largest cities of the East Coast, leading high government officials to boast that the nation had "turned the corner on the heroin problem." Today it is realized that the recent decline was both temporary and regional, and that the addiction rate nationally is once again on the rise. This paper highlights changing heroin trafficking patterns.

Heroin derives from an Old World flower of noted beauty, the poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). The seed pod of the poppy, when slit after the petals have fallen from the flowers, exudes a sticky substance, opium. Converting opium to morphine is a relatively simple process involving boiling, filtering and precipitating with a resultant weight loss of about 90 percent. The next conversion, morphine to heroin, is more complicated and explosion-prone, necessitating constant supervision by a "chemist." While the heroin trade is widely regarded as the most profitable of criminal enterprises, the actual raising of opium poppies is associated only with countries having cheap, abundant labor, poppy raising being a labor-intensive process estimated to require between 175 and 250 man-hours of labor to produce one kilo of opium.¹

The cultivation of opium poppies, whether for the legal market (as the raw material for alkaloids such as morphine and codeine) or the more profitable illegal market, has historically been most heavily concentrated in a mountainous swath through southern Asia, stretching from Turkey's Anatolian Plateau in the southwest, through the northern edges of the Indian subcontinent,

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into the "Golden Triangle" of the southeast. It is this latter area, consisting of remote parts of Burma, Thailand and Laos, that has long been the world's largest opium producer.

The Traditional Turkish-French Connection

The origins and flow of much of the heroin destined for the United States were apparently less complex than today during most of the post-World War II period. Following the outlawing of poppy cultivation in Iran in 1955, Turkey expanded its contribution to the United States market.² From then until the early 1970's, Turkey was apparently the major source of the opium which finally entered this country as heroin. Federal government estimates usually credited Turkey with providing 80 percent of the supply, but a number of skeptics have recently suggested that these estimates may have been exaggerated.

After the conversion of Turkish opium into morphine, usually within Turkey or neighboring Syria, there were many routes, air, land or sea, to Marseilles, France, the most important heroin manufacturing site. It was in this Mediterranean port that a few tightly organized Corsican syndicates masterminded much of the heroin trade, from the initial purchase of opium in Turkey through the various transits and conversions, to the sale of heroin to syndicates in the United States. From Marseilles, until the mid-1960's, heroin was normally "body-carried" across the Atlantic. Then, secreting it into commercial cargo, such as automobiles, also became common.³ As United States border and drug control personnel became increasingly suspicious of cargo arriving from France, transshipment, especially to Canada or Mexico, increased.

Increasing Complexity During the 1970's

Diplomatic pressure to gain the assistance of Turkey and France in impeding the flow of drugs along that conduit yielded little until the early 1970's, largely because heroin addiction was historically minimal in both countries. However, the onset of a more serious addiction problem in France prompted it to increase law enforcement efforts, resulting in the closure of several Marseilles heroin labs. Finally, after intense pressure

by the United States (and the promise of 35 million dollars in aid), Turkey agreed to ban production of the opium poppy. The ban became effective in 1972 following the spring harvest.⁴

These successes on the diplomatic front, combined with substantial increases in domestic law enforcement, did seem to reduce the availability of heroin in large eastern cities. This East Coast shortage, in addition to being reflected in intelligence reports, also was confirmed between mid-1972 and mid-1973 by a tripling in the street price of heroin, while the purity of a street bag dropped from about eight to only two or three percent.⁵

Many experts had held that heroin addicts will pay any price, the demand was thus supposed to be price-inelastic. This, however, was not the case. As the price in the East rose, the consumption declined, suggesting that increased drug treatment programs offered an alternative to heroin use. Evidence of this addiction decline within the major urban centers of the East Coast included a decrease in serum hepatitis (easily transmitted by dirty needles) and fewer overdose deaths.

The eastern supply shortage and consequent price rise, however, did not affect all of the country. Indeed, in the West, prices and purity remained approximately at earlier levels, indicating a continued plentiful supply. By the early 1970's, drug seizures in the western states were increasingly yielding a crude, brown heroin, a less refined product differing in appearance from the highly refined white Turkish-French heroin. Plotting heroin seizures by type, the Drug Enforcement Administration has shown the brown variety by mid-1972 to have spread across much of the country, with the highest proportion of brown to white being in the Southwest. In Southern California, for example, between 75 and 100 percent of the captured heroin was brown, and even as far east as Indianapolis and Chicago the brown variety accounted for up to a fourth of the total captured (Figure 1).

This wave of brown heroin issuing out of the Southwest continued to flood north and east so that by the end of 1974, seizures across much of the western two-thirds of the country were exclusively of the brown variety (Figure 2). These highly generalized heroin seizure maps, based upon arrests confined

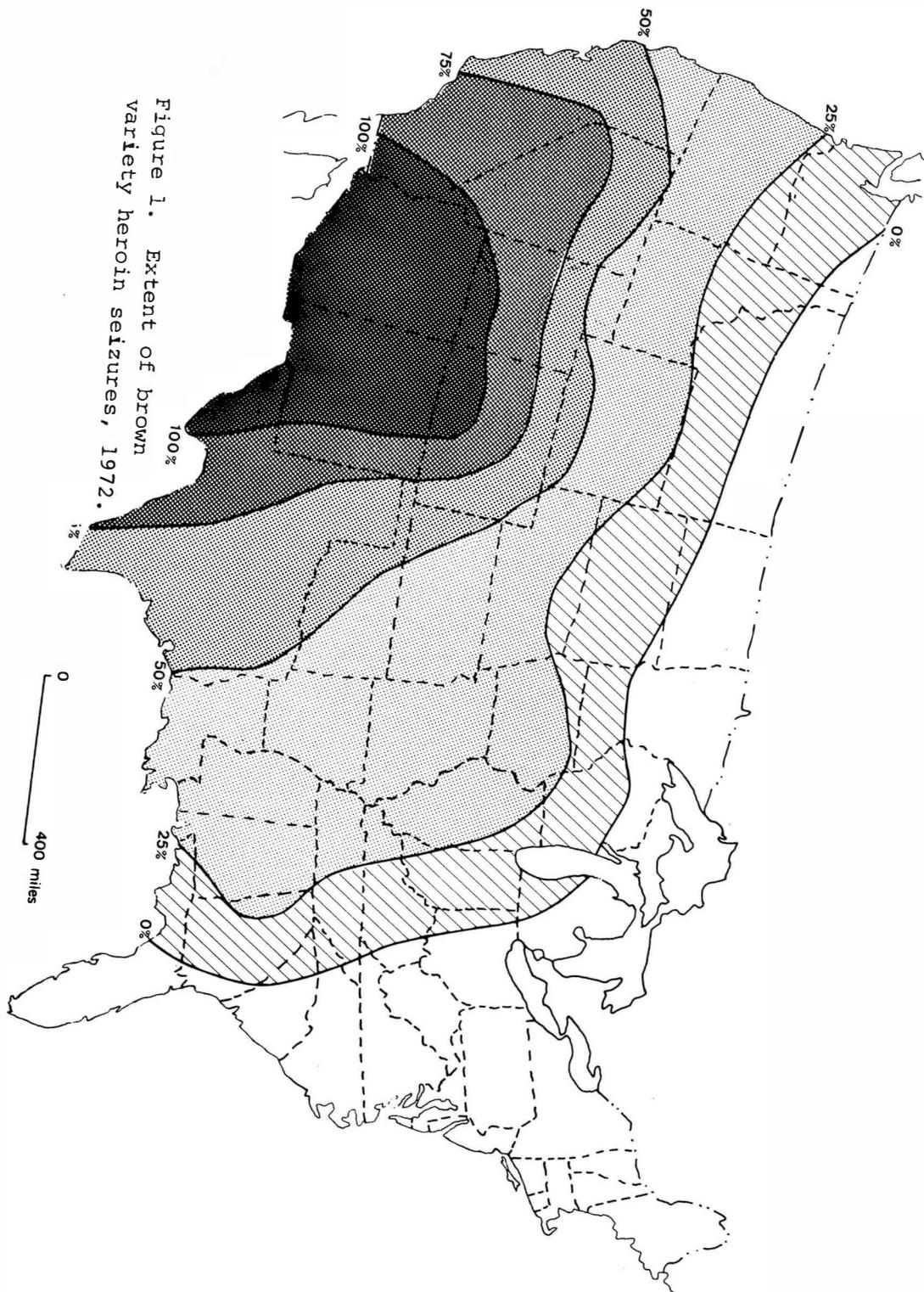


Figure 1. Extent of brown variety heroin seizures, 1972.

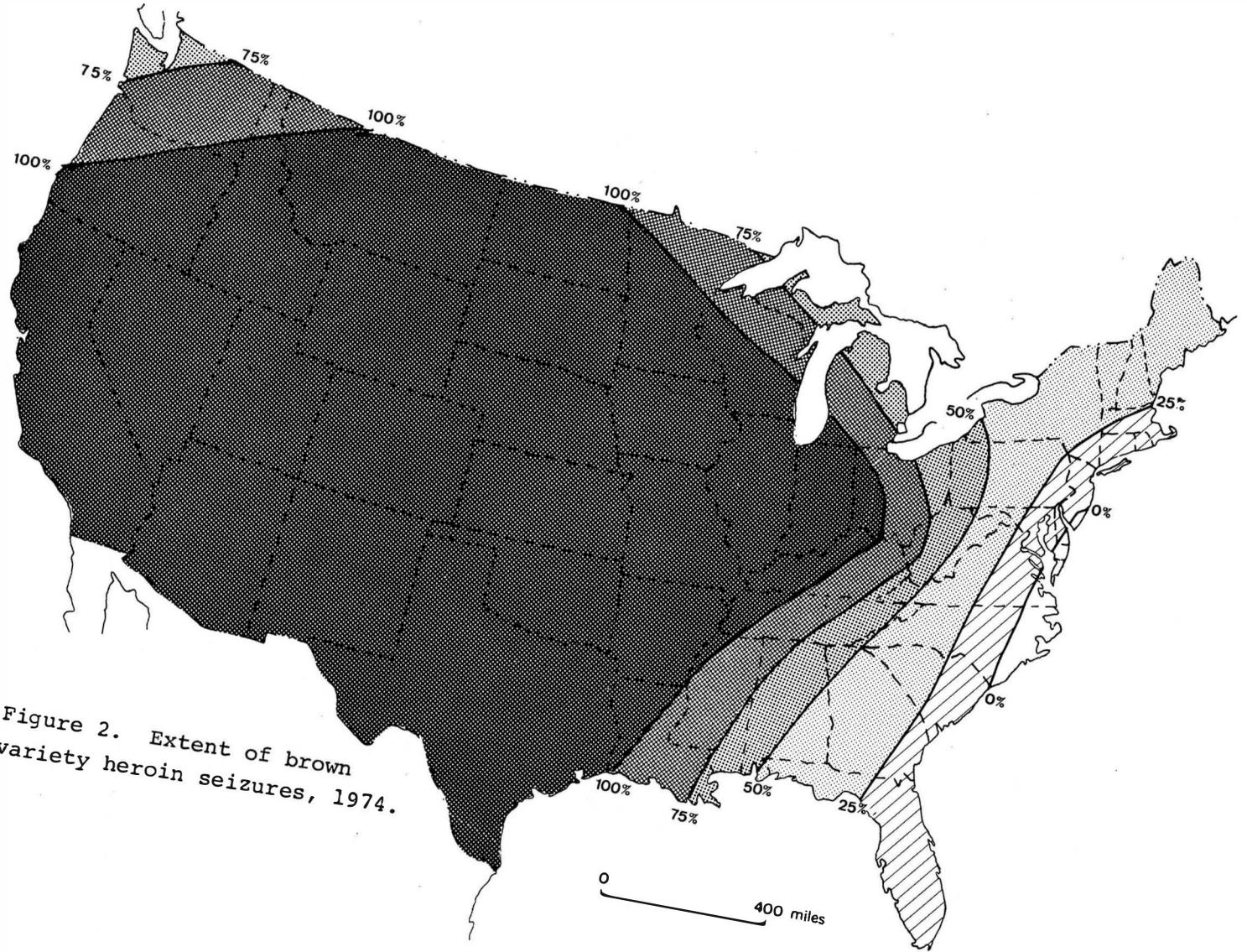


Figure 2. Extent of brown variety heroin seizures, 1974.

mostly to major urbanized areas, suggest a continuous space diffusion of brown heroin across the country. If more complete data were available, a hierarchial diffusion of brown heroin would probably be apparent around large cities.

The displacement of white by brown heroin and the reorientation of trafficking routes reflected, of course, changing heroin origins. Throughout much of the sixties and still at the beginning of the seventies, federal narcotics officials ascribed our heroin sources, in addition to the supposed 80 percent from Turkey, as: Mexico, 15 percent, and Southeast Asia, 5 percent. These were, however, only educated guesses and may have underestimated the contribution from the latter two.

Attention first began to focus on Mexico in the mid-1960's when it became an important transshipment link for Turkish-French heroin. Apparently since World War II, Mexico has also been a significant producer and exporter of heroin. The diminishing Turkish source, then, merely stimulated, but did not initiate, the Mexican production.⁶

Originating in isolated poppy fields in remote parts of the Sierra Madre Occidental, Mexico's heroin industry contrasts sharply in organization with that of the Turkey-France. As Wilson has noted:

... the Mexican heroin is not managed by a monopoly distributor or by a few tightly-organized "connections." Free enterprise reigns, with a host of distributional networks ranging from the casual "mule" (a person carrying a small quantity of the drug on his person) to well-financed organizations operating boats and airplanes.⁷

The complex, unstructured Mexican industry has thus proved to be remarkably unsusceptible to lasting disruption. Considering too, the common border of 2,000 miles, it is little wonder that Mexico has become such a large supplier of the United States' market. The Drug Enforcement Administration estimated that by mid-1975, Mexico was supplying 50 percent of the heroin consumed in the United States, nearly all of it being of the brown variety (Table 1).

Adding to the plentiful western supply of heroin is Southeast Asia, now being credited with furnishing 25 percent of the

TABLE 1

Estimated Types and Origins of Heroin
in the United States, 1975

	Brown	White	Total
Mexico	45%	5%	50%
Southeast Asia	20%	5%	25%
Middle East/Europe	0%	25%	25%
	65%	35%	100%

Source: Personal communication: Tom Costigan, Acting Director, Office of Public Affairs, Drug Enforcement Administration, April 14, 1975.

United States' consumption, much of it also brown (Table 1). The latter years of the American involvement in Indochina saw a massive heroin addiction problem ensnaring American soldiers, and the fear was often expressed that returning veterans might greatly balloon the domestic drug market.⁸ This appears not to have materialized, most of those once addicted in Vietnam not becoming readdicted in the United States.⁹

By *smoking* heroin in Vietnam, the former addicts had been doing something which was acceptable to many of their peers. Once in the United States, however, most had no interest in resuming the habit because the drug culture (associated with ghettos, street crime, needles, etc.) was alien to their way of life. It therefore appears that the now substantial Southeast Asian heroin contribution probably does not arise from trafficking established by or for American veterans. Evidence suggests that ethnic Chinese seamen from Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore, calling at such ports as San Francisco, Vancouver, and New York may be important conduits.¹⁰

In addition to trafficking shifts stemming from changing source regions, there is yet another significant geographic change: the spread of epidemic-like heroin use from large to smaller cities, peak heroin addiction usually occurring between one and three years following the peak in the nearest large city. Identifiable heroin problems, once thought to be restricted to

megalopolitan ghettos, have spread to such "Middle American" bastions as Des Moines, Iowa; Austin, Texas and Eugene, Oregon.¹¹ Hunt views this shift to smaller cities as similar to the "hierarchical diffusion" Berry observed in the spread of such innovations as television.¹²

By 1975, an estimated one-fourth of the U.S. heroin supply was still coming from Middle East/Europe (Table 1). This heroin, largely restricted to the East Coast, was becoming steadily more available, as indicated by dropping street prices and higher purity. Lebanon was a suspected source of some of this white product. Some, too, was apparently originating from opium or morphine cached in Turkey, or from Turkish poppies cultivated in spite of the ban. Much of this Middle Eastern heroin may have been processed entirely in that part of the world, bypassing the traditional French laboratories.¹³ With Turkey's decision to resume poppy cultivation for the legal market, the first post-ban harvest being late Spring, 1975, an enlarging role for Turkey on the illicit market also seems inevitable, in spite of that country's pledge of tight controls on growing and harvesting.

Conclusion

Traditional Turkish-French white heroin became temporarily scarce on the East Coast, but in the West there has been a massive influx of brown heroin, primarily from Mexico. Adding to these changes has been the spread of heroin addiction from large to some mid-sized cities. It would seem then that the United States has not "turned the corner" on its heroin problem. Instead, what is turning, or changing, are the source regions, transportation patterns, and locations of domestic consumption.

NOTES

¹John F. Holahan, "The Economics of Heroin," in Drug Abuse Survey Project, *Dealing with Drug Abuse: A Report to the Ford Foundation* (New York: Praeger, 1972), p. 258.

²U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The International Narcotics Trade and Its Relation to the United States*, by Seymour Halpern, House Report No. 92-836 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 10.

³Evert Clark and Nicholas Horrock, *Contrabandista!* (New York: Praeger, 1973) p. 35.

⁴U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Foreign Affairs, *The Politics of The Poppy*, Report of a Study Mission to Turkey, March 14-16, 1974, 93rd Cong., 2nd sess., 1974, p. 1.

⁵James Q. Wilson, "The Return of Heroin," *Commentary*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (April 1975), p. 48.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1972).

⁹Lee N. Robbins *et al.*, "How Permanent was Vietnam Drug Addiction?" *American Journal of Public Health* (Supplement), Vol. 64 (December 1974), pp. 38-43.

¹⁰Ross M. Riley, "The New Chinese Connection," *Drug Enforcement*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 1975), pp. 30-31.

¹¹Mark H. Green *et al.*, *An Assessment of the Diffusion of Heroin Abuse to Medium-sized American Cities* (Washington: Executive Office of the President Special Action Office for Drug Abuse Prevention, 1974).

¹²Leon G. Hunt, "Recent Spread of Heroin Use in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* (Supplement), Vol. 64 (December 1974), pp. 20-22, and Brian Berry, "Hierarchical Diffusion: The Basis of Development, Filtering and Spread of Growth Centers," in N. M. Hansen, ed., *Growth Centers in Regional Economic Development* (New York: Free Press, 1972), pp. 118-23.

¹³Personal communication: Tom Costigan, Acting Director, Office of Public Affairs, Drug Enforcement Administration April 14, 1975.