

## Cracking the Recovery Code

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Recovery from an addiction is elusive and indefinable, and thus hard to measure except in evaluations of specific time increments. It is widely agreed that addictions are a cyclical journey of ups and downs and addicts are rarely “cured” because of relapses. What is aimed for in “recovery,” then, is to break the pattern of drug use with as few relapses as possible. The cycle has proven to be harder to break for users of drugs that are prevalent among low socioeconomic groups, namely, crack cocaine (Glazer 2). Crack has taken hold of a significant portion of poor urban communities, and poverty is largely responsible for the lifelong clutch that crack has on its users. Moreover, the legal system heightens and reinforces the addiction and its hold on the user through the enforcement of severe laws that plunge the user's life into a greater state of disrepair.

Demographically speaking, the prototype crack user is black and from the inner city. The culture surrounding crack use is often grim, and is painted on a canvas of poverty and discrimination. It is without question that discrimination and racism towards the black community are alive and well, serving as one more reason to turn to the inexpensive feeling of paradise that is abundantly available (Joseph 424).

Crack addiction's onset is also remarkably young, beginning with the exposure many of the black, inner-city youths have to the drug through family members and friends. It is not uncommon for children in the inner city to begin experimenting with drugs as young as ages seven or eight (Joseph 424). The foundation for a long road of drug addiction is paved much earlier in life and with a tighter hold on this community of users because of this early disposition towards drugs.

In many cases, while availability and exposure instigate the handicap a crack user bears,

poverty sinks the user deeper and heightens the allure of the drug because of the financial opportunities it offers. Desperation for a sufficient wage can make dealing an attractive recourse. Inner-city youths often resort to drug dealing because of the dire economic situations in the workforce surrounding them (Joseph 425). If pleasure-seeking through drug use had not already lured these children in, a desire for a better life through high wages will, especially when its commonality makes it seem natural. The income of a drug dealer represents, for most in this environment, a step up in the world and is therefore worth the risks it carries. It is also a reason why letting go of the addiction is an unappealing venture. Drug dealing and usage becomes a lifeline for its victims.

Clearly, addiction is more prevalent in the inner-city community because of societal injustices that have historically been cast upon this group. Those with little to lose and no hope in the horizon are more likely to jeopardize their lives: “For people who live at the economic and social edge of society, disaster is only a small step away” (Stuntz 1815). Very often the cycle of addiction is much harder to break because of the very reasons the drug use began. The disadvantage for crack users is that once addiction has taken hold, the users sink in quicksand with the burden of poverty weighing them down.

In the rare occurrence that a low-income user seeks help for his or her addiction, poverty once again hinders the battle in which all the odds are already against them. One study shows that of forty-two patients on a month-long waiting list for a cocaine abuse treatment center, only 16 percent received treatment. For the remaining 84 percent, there was a dramatic increase of intensity in social, medical, psychiatric, and drug problems (McClellan 67). It is common for low-income abusers to be placed on waiting lists for treatment, many times leading to the similar fate these addicts met. Poverty, the central instigator for crack use, plagues this group when they

muster the strength to seek a better life.

Poverty prevents a crack user's "recovery" perhaps most radically in light of the legal and prosecutorial system. The crack trade is responsible for a significantly larger amount of violent crime than its powder counterpart, as the pattern for lower class markets generally reflect (Stuntz 1799). This is true for a range of reasons spurred by the emergence of crack as the cheaper cocaine in the mid 1980s. The drug trade is inherently violent because of the lack of legal grounding for making deals and settling disputes, calling for violence to execute agreements and protect the dealers' operations and profits (Grogger 520). Hence, a larger pool of customers and suppliers arose because the synthesizing of crack from powder "reduces the unit cost of cocaine intoxication:" and lower prices create a greater demand. Theft had already been prevalent in poor communities, and, consequently, rates increased to support a new emergence of drug dependence. Poverty, the catalyst behind the scourge of drugs, is also the cause of violent crime to support the habit. The fate of many potential crack "recoveries" is here met, either with arrest for the violent crime or death.

It can be argued that violence is in the biological makeup of the drug. In addition, it reaches the brain more rapidly and in a more concentrated state because it is smoked, causing a shorter but more potent high. This increases the psychological symptoms of cocaine, including paranoia, hallucinations, violence, and psychosis (Acee 614). Crack is a reputed cause for AIDS among the black community because of the high-risk sexual behavior the drug encourages, in addition to the nature of the "crack house:" where sex is commonly traded for crack (Joseph 428). It could be argued that the drug user should reduce the onset of the said reactions by choosing to use powdered cocaine, but the remarkably lower prices make crack the accessible drug for its impoverished users.

However, the dramatic tilt towards the black community of crack users in prisons is not entirely explained by the violent culture surrounding crack. In the consensual crime aspect of the crack trade-the dealing and selling in which both parties are in consensual agreement, there are a horrifically higher number of arrests for crack than for cocaine. Of the total prison population of 1.7 million in 1997, 51 percent were black with a U.S. population of only 13 percent black. Clearly, what is largely responsible for the unbalanced number of blacks in prison is the execution of radically severe sentencing for crack (Stuntz 1795).

The Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 enacted the minimum sentencing for both cocaine and crack. The minimum sentence for possessing 5000 grams of cocaine powder was calculated at ten years and at five years for 500 grams. The quantities were determined by what Congress deemed indicative of a major drug dealing, which in the case of cocaine powder, is probably accurate.

Congress, based on the higher toxicity of crack versus cocaine powder, did not base the minimum sentences for attainment of crack by the same scale. The jail times for crack were not based on what would be a “major trafficker” amount, rather the arbitrary division of cocaine powder's weight by one hundred. Thus, for 500 grams of crack, the minimum sentencing is equivalent to that of 5000 grams of cocaine powder. These figures of crack are admittedly not reflective of what a major drug dealer would possess (Sklansky 1287). The street vendor, the person who suffers from these laws, is only the tip of the iceberg on the drug pyramid, because crack is usually converted towards the end of the drug chain, meaning that the true drug lords do not even handle the transformed cocaine. The poorest in the drug chain, those with least to lose, take the job of playing with fire by dealing crack out of desperation for a sufficient income. These guidelines, in tandem with the police trafficking patterns for crack, drain the inner-city

crack users of hope for escaping their addiction.

Crack is typically dealt on the streets of inner cities. In upscale drug markets such as cocaine powder, transactions are typically confined to private areas. As expected, drug laws are enforced with much less effort when the dealers are on the streets, making crack a primary target for officers over upscale drugs. In order for a house to be searched, there would need to be an extensive amount of evidence and probable cause to gain search warrants. Street-encounter drug busts require very little information or suspicion to be legally executed (Stuntz 1821-1823).

Herein lies the handicap of being impoverished in the scheme of recovery from the legal perspective. Getting arrested with a relatively modest quantity of crack (in comparison to its powder counterpart) locks up a user at a minimum of five years. One can only imagine the devastating effects this would have on a life already hanging by a thread. What were dire circumstances become truly desperate, and this is with the luck of being arrested only once. One-time arrests are rarely the case for crack users, considering these defendants rarely go through effective treatment; and crack addiction, like most addictions, is notorious for its relapses. Crack dealers and users are on a completely different field of exposure than higher-class transactions, a much more closely and easily monitored open space (Stuntz 1824). Because the drug is most often dealt in the street, dealers are more likely to accumulate several arrests, causing destruction to not only the life of the user, but also to the user's family. As if the crack addict does not have reason enough to use, constant obstructions unequally imposed by the legal system give them plenty more.

The community of crack users as a whole stand at a blatant disadvantage for freedom from drug use, for reasons that were decided hundreds of years ago when racism and injustice began in the United States. Poverty, the lack of equal job opportunities, and poor education

essentially throw the crack users of this community into a river without a raft; they have no venue or means to recover from the addiction that was practically imposed on them. This is a far cry from a proposal to legalize drugs, but after examining the disparity between the laws surrounding the different “classes” of drugs, it is clear that the cycle the inner city users are in will perpetuate into the future generations. There can be no end to or recovery from drugs without addressing the cause and correcting this long history of inequality.

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