

# Crack in the System: examining the myths

Aidan Gray looks at the history of social attitudes to cocaine use.

To understand the connection between cocaine and crime and the stereotypes generated by this combination, we need first to look to history for illumination on the roots of our perceptions. Cocaine began its connection with crime on the other side of the fence in 1887 when it appeared as the flaw in an otherwise perfect detective, Sherlock Holmes (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was partial to Vin Mariani, a French wine infused with coca). However, cocaine was first seriously connected with criminal behaviour as far back as 1911 when Dr Hamilton Wright, head of the USA's anti-opium crusade wrote in the New York Times:

"The illicit use of the drug is most difficult to cope with, and the habitual use of it temporarily raises the power of the criminal to a point where in resisting arrest, there is no hesitation to murder."

If we dig a little further we start to see more startling articles appearing that not only talk about the connection between cocaine and crime but also start to point the finger of blame at certain sections of the community. Probably the most shocking of all came again from the New York Times in 1914,

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written by Dr Edward H Williams under the headline Negro Cocaine 'Fiends' are a New Southern Menace'; he reported that:

"Since this gruesome evidence is supported by the printed records of insane hospitals, police courts, jails and penitentiaries, there is no escaping the conviction that drug taking has become a race menace in certain regions south of the line."

From reports in magazines and newspaper articles we can ascertain that at this time cocaine use seemed to be roughly split into three categories. If you were rich and white, this didn't seem to pose too much of a threat, although it was not condoned; if you were poor and white then you were a potential criminal and if you were poor and black you were a 'fiend'. It might be easy to dismiss the issues above as being purely historical and of no real consequence in 2002, but let's take an honest look at our current perceptions. Have things really changed that much since the early 1900s?

In the United States in 1992, Robert Stutman, a senior agent for the DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration), revealed in his autobiography *Dead on Delivery* that:

"There was no doubt in my mind that crack was

on its way to becoming a national problem. But, to speed up the process of convincing Washington, I needed to make it a national issue and quickly. I began a lobbying effort and I used the media. Reporters were only too willing to co-operate..."

Four years previously Robert Stutman had addressed the Ninth Annual Drugs Conference of Assistant Chief Police Officers in Wales and proceeded to continue the manipulation of facts regarding crack that he had started in the USA. He introduced the idea that after three hits of crack "75 per cent will become physically addicted" and went on to describe the 'crack epidemic' phenomenon as "no other drug in history comes close to spreading that quickly". Parents were targeted by his suggestion that if he "wanted to design a drug that's aimed for kids," he "couldn't improve on it [crack]" and he played on the fear of violence by describing the change of guns issued in the DEA from a .38 handgun, to all agents being issued with sub-machine guns and stating "That is what has happened in one country basically because of crack."

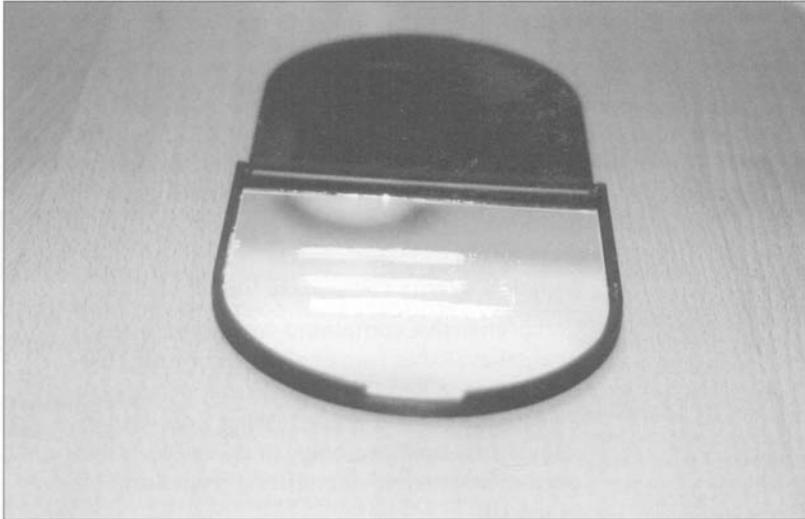
And finally he discussed the issue of race: "Right now crack is controlled by a fairly large number of organisations, basically because of its background:

Dominicans and Jamaicans... now again, I don't have to tell any of you gentlemen this, but you have a large number of Jamaicans in this country."

So in a nutshell crack was almost instantly physically addictive, its use spread rapidly, it was very appealing to children, caused serious violence and its distribution was controlled by Jamaicans. And this was exactly how it was reported in the British press, inaccurate, sensationalist and very damaging.

You might say this was fourteen years ago and we are much more knowledgeable now, have learned from our mistakes and moved on - but have we?

In December of last year there was a spate of television, radio and newspaper articles citing the supposed fact that one in ten passengers flying from Jamaica are 'cocaine mules' and could be carrying as many as 100 packets of cocaine each. It seemed that the media were suggesting that Jamaica was responsible for most of the cocaine reaching UK shores and that organised Jamaican crime syndicates (Yardies) were behind this. Yet when we examine seizure rates by H.M. Customs we find that seizures originating from Jamaica account for only around seven per cent of their total haul. It seems that views haven't really changed that much since the beginning



of the last century — they've just become a little more politically correct.

To really move forward and address this issue we need to dispel some of the myths and start looking at reality:

- Cocaine is not instantly physically addictive; in fact cocaine has no physically addictive properties but can form a strong psychological dependence.
- There has not been and probably will not be a 'crack epidemic' in the UK; in reality its use has spread gradually.
- Cocaine use doesn't inevitably lead to violence. In some cases it does, but not on the same scale as violence associated with alcohol.
- Crack is not specifically a 'black drug'. The majority of people using crack and cocaine in the UK are white.
- Most users of crack and cocaine probably do not support their habit via crime.

The current increase in crack and cocaine related statistics throughout the criminal justice system is probably the result of three things; the general increase in crack and cocaine use throughout the UK (and the proportionate rise in criminal behaviour), the raised awareness / development of crack specific services by drug agencies (attracting more users to their services) and the implementation of specific criminal justice drug initiatives such as arrest referral, CARAT schemes and Drug Treatment and Testing Orders (increased identification of crack and cocaine users).

It is my belief that these new initiatives can be used productively with crack and cocaine dependence to help both the user and the community. But this can only be achieved if we can raise our awareness and act on the reality rather than the myth. Cocaine is in the criminal justice system

but we have to be mindful that cracks do not appear in the system through our prejudice, pre-conceptions and stereotypes.

These stereotypes are often the product of sensationalist reporting and politicians climbing on the anti-drug bandwagon, so it is vitally important that we look at the issue rationally, understand how our views are influenced by history and obtain the facts. COCA (a national support agency) developed out of this need for information in 1996 and currently supports many organisations and professionals across the UK in working with the issues surrounding crack and cocaine dependence. Support from COCA and other agencies within the drug field is gradually helping to change professional and academic opinions surrounding crack and cocaine dependence, as can currently be demonstrated with the positive developments being initiated by the Department of Health, Prison Service and Probation Service. Drug problems are not just about the drug, they are about the society that we live in and until we start to understand the roots and contributory factors that cause drug problems we cannot hope to adequately respond to the issue.

*Aidan Gray is currently the National Co-ordinator of COCA, an organisation set up to support professionals working with the issue of cocaine dependence. For more information, see [www.coca.org.uk](http://www.coca.org.uk)*

#### References:

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