

French Connection Stays Dominant in Market Here

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The French Connection has lost its hold on the heroin market in most of the country, but it still dominates in New York.

After a long dry spell, Federal authorities here say that French heroin is plentiful again in the city, as demonstrated by the fact that it's averaging close to seven per cent pure on the street, up from four per cent a year ago.

"It's a buyers' market again," said John Fallon, the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration's regional director here.

Until 1971 heroin processed in France was flowing into the United States at the rate of 10 tons a year and bags sold on the street were running as much as 15 per cent pure. But in the next year the French heroin suppliers began suffering a series of devastating reversals.

A Global Assault

First the South American route, which was handling 35 per cent of all French heroin shipments to the United States, was demolished with the arrests of the major French-Corsican traffickers in Latin America.

Then United States narcotics agents began intercepting huge shipments of heroin being sent directly to North American cities, including one totaling 412 kilos (906 pounds).

Back in France, the police, acting under international pressure, started convicting major traffickers, identifying laboratories and making big seizures of both finished heroin being shipped out of the country and opium base from Turkey being shipped into France to be processed.

The law-enforcement pressure was enhanced by Turkey's decision in 1972 to prohibit further cultivation of poppies.

All these factors forced French suppliers to cut back sharply on the amount of heroin they sent to the United States.

"They decided to concentrate on their main market, the East Coast from Richmond to New York, and leave the rest of the country to the Mexicans," said John T. Cusack, the Drug Enforcement Administration's chief of international operations.

But the harassed French suppliers could not provide enough heroin even for their narrowed market, and local wholesalers were forced to cut their supply so much that by 1973 what was sold on the street was only two per cent pure.

Unsatisfied with the heroin available, Mr. Cusack said, many addicts here switched to methadone, went into treatment centers or slowly detoxified themselves because the heroin they were buying was increasingly diluted. "As a result, the number of heroin addicts on our streets declined considerably," he said.

In the last year, however, authorities believe the French traffickers have reorganized and have found new ways of sending heroin here. One method, according to Federal agents, involves sending shipments to the Midwest, where they're less likely to be intercepted, and having them forwarded East from there.

The reorganization of the traffickers in France and the decrease in customers here have made heroin more available again, authorities say, and that, in turn, has resulted in the higher purity of what is sold on the street. The degree of purity is seen as a measure of availability.

Some narcotics specialists believe the increased availability is due to the release of heroin stockpiles compiled by the traffickers three years ago when Turkey announced its ban on further cultivation of opium poppies.

The traffickers stockpiled the heroin, the theory goes, in anticipation of soaring prices once the ban was felt in the illegal drug market, and they released the stockpiles when Turkey announced last year that it would resume cultivation of poppies.

A New Worry

Mr. Cusack and Arthur Grubert the chief of intelligence in the Drug Enforcement Administration's office in New York, do not believe that significant stockpiles ever existed.

"If the French had that much heroin available, they would have broadened their market again, but they haven't," Mr. Cusack said.

But officials of the Drug Enforcement Administration are very concerned that the French traffickers will start to do big business again once the poppy crops in Turkey are harvested.

Mr. Cusack pointed out that Turkey first said it would allow 70,000 farmers to cultivate opium poppies, but it has now quietly increased that number to 103,000.

"If each farmer holds back just one kilo for the illegal drug market, that's 100 tons of opium," he said. "That can bury us."