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## In Affluent Suburbs, Young Users and Sellers Abound; 12,000 in Fairfax Were Treated in Last 4 Years Series: SUBURBAN HIGH: TEENAGERS AND DRUGS IN FAIRFAX Series Number: 1/2; [FINAL Edition]

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Full Text (3270 words)

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Meet the drug dealer: 15 and freckle-faced and already experienced at his trade.

He started his lucrative Fairfax County business the same year he became a teenager, handling the hottest commodity – marijuana – but also a boutique line of PCP, Ecstasy, Special K. Two years later, he was "hooking up and dealing to a few adults."

It was only then, the Oakton boy said, that he thought his life "was weird."

Teenagers dealing drugs is a reality in neighborhoods throughout suburban Washington, from leafy Bethesda to the landscaped neighborhoods of Columbia and the quiet drives of Bowie. The Washington Post concentrated on Fairfax, the area's largest jurisdiction, to find out how and where suburban youths get their drugs -- gathering information about juvenile drug arrests and drug searches, and interviewing 100 county youngsters in depth, as well as scores of law enforcement, school, court and counseling officials.

Virtually all of the teenagers – who were contacted through treatment centers, randomly at a mall and at the juvenile detention center, where most were not being held on drug charges -- said they not only use drugs but also sell them, mostly to friends and most so casually they bristle at the label "dealer."

Drug counselors also said most of the teenagers they evaluate have admitted distributing drugs in addition to using them.

"The notion that an outsider is dealing to kids is a bunch of malarkey," said Robert F. Horan Jr., the Fairfax commonwealth's attorney. "The average kid in this community gets his drugs from another kid."

The teenage drug problem in Fairfax is hardly worse than elsewhere in the Washington area, but its very existence is notable in a county with low crime, affluence, a highly educated populace and one of the best school systems in the nation.

It is a county literally populated with people who moved there because they care about their children, yet drugs pervade it.

Over the last four years, 6,000 juveniles were directed to the county's growing drug-treatment program – and an equal number of others were referred at their request from there to private facilities.

During the last school year, 111 were recommended for expulsion for drug- and alcohol-related incidents, and there were 544 suspensions. More than 560 were arrested in the last calendar year in Fairfax and its incorporated towns for drug crimes, nearly 12 times as many as were arrested a decade ago.

Last year, of the children treated at Inova Fairfax Hospital's emergency room, 163 were found to be under the influence of drugs, although not all children are screened.

As chilling as the statistics are, "the numbers don't reflect the depth of the problem," said Patrick McConnell, who oversees the county's youth alcohol and drug services.

Adults, of course, are at the top of the supply pyramid. The middle is murky. Teenagers who got drugs from someone outside their age group said they came from older teenagers or young adults ages 18 to their early twenties -- a group that would show up as adults in any arrests -- but because drug organizations are tiered, teenagers may not know where their suppliers got the drugs. At the bottom, police, prosecutors and teenagers say, children are dealing to children, not just in Fairfax but across the country.

Illicit drug use among eighth-graders has more than doubled in the last six years, according to some national drug surveys, and although recent studies show a dip that might indicate a tapering of the growth, the numbers remain substantially higher than they were at the beginning of the decade.

Most of their drug deals, Fairfax teenagers said, are quick transactions that take place in homes and cars but also in public, at theaters and sports events, at shopping malls and in parking lots. The absence of open-air drug markets shouldn't be taken as an absence of flagrant dealing, as one 17-year-old Chantilly girl's description made clear. Teenage dealing goes on, she said, in spots "like grocery stores, elementary schools, places you'd never think a drug deal is going down. Tennis courts, pools." It is "everywhere," she said, yet "completely invisible."

### Small, Casual Sales

Ask Fairfax kids where they get their dope and the answer comes back: Fairfax kids.

"My experience is that kids tell the truth" when asked in counseling about their drug use, McConnell said. "The kids will tell you exactly what is going on in the street."

What they say echoes what the nation's drug czar says.

If your child bought drugs, "it was from a student of their own race generally," said Barry McCaffrey, head of the White House Office on Drug Control Policy.

The criminal cases filed against 263 juveniles in Fairfax County bear that out. The cases, brought from July 1, 1996, to June 30, 1997, show the defendants were overwhelmingly white, male and ages 15 to 16. The youngest was a Reston girl, 11 at the time she was charged with marijuana possession.

The users and the sellers were high school athletes, runaways, honor students, gang members, cheerleaders, victims of sexual abuse and car thieves. Their parents lead busy lives as lawyers, government employees, business owners, teachers, construction workers and financial consultants.

Like the Reston girl, the vast majority of defendants were from the county; only 16 were from outside. All but two county high schools had at least one of its students in the arrest records, and a number of middle schools and four private schools.

Although some teenagers move large quantities of drugs for older teenagers or adults, most said in interviews that they deal in a flurry of smaller, more casual sales to a tight circle of friends and acquaintances. Girls said it is easier, and cheaper, for them to get drugs than it is for boys, and some girls said they have traded sex for drugs.

Marijuana possession was the most common offense in the court cases, but there were 39 instances of distributing drugs on school property and 52 felony cases for distributing or possessing a controlled drug.

"Kids, across the board, report that it's easier to get marijuana, LSD, drugs like that, than it is to get cigarettes," said Thomas W. Minnick, the director of Northern Virginia Counseling Group, a private treatment facility. "Pretty amazing, when you think about it."

Although marijuana and alcohol are widely popular, children surveyed in the county's public treatment program reported that they had used others: 40 percent have used LSD, and 75 percent have used inhalants. They have sucked fumes out of the top of unshaken whipped cream cans, inhaled Freon from the family air conditioner and

downed bottles of Robitussin cough medicine to find a high. Five seventh- and eighth-graders at Hayfield Secondary School were arrested in November after the school principal heard that a student was selling other students Ritalin, a prescription drug for attention deficit disorder.

Children in treatment also said their drug use started early, often as young as 10 or 12.

Among the 100 Fairfax teenagers interviewed for this article, nearly all said they had sold drugs undetected and weren't overly concerned about getting caught. Tellingly, it was often a behavior problem or crime other than drug use that landed them in trouble.

"Nobody ever gets caught unless somebody snitches. It's the easiest way to make money," said a 17-year-old Clifton youth, being held on car theft charges. Like others in custody, and most of those interviewed outside the court system, he asked for anonymity.

One eighth-grader, caught dealing marijuana at his Herndon middle school after a classmate alerted an administrator, told Fairfax police that business was so good he had to hide his money from his parents to avoid suspicion.

"He said he made so much money . . . he had to dig a hole in his wooded back yard and bury it," county police officer Gary D. Bailey said.

When they want to finance their own supply, teenagers will buy a little extra and sell it to friends. Some said they make hundreds of dollars a week or more, with business especially brisk after school, when parents are at work.

Allowances and checks from part-time jobs help pay for the drugs, some teenagers said, while others said they steal money from their parents or mooch dope from friends.

The hottest item is marijuana packaged in tiny, easy-to-conceal bags: in \$5, \$10 or \$20 packets.

A 16-year-old Burke teenager said she sold drugs for six years from her family's three-bedroom town house. Her mother "doesn't know I sold," said the girl, who was being held in juvenile detention after running away from home. "She knows I smoke weed, but she'll never know how much. Six years dealing in the same house, I'm lucky."

Making a connection can be easy, especially given that teenagers say they use the openness of an area to their advantage.

"If we're going to do it, we're going to do it out in the open," a 17-year-old Herndon teenager said. "The cops won't expect it." The teenager, who was being held on petty theft and assault charges -- not a drug charge -- said he sold outside a multiplex theater.

Another 16-year-old Burke teenager said he bought and sold marijuana and LSD at the top of the Springfield Mall parking terrace. Other times, it was at the local Roy Rogers.

Over a two-year span, he said, he sold marijuana to about 200 people, with 20 to 30 regular customers. He bought drugs, including LSD and PCP, using money he made as a supermarket stock boy. He didn't view himself as a major dealer, just someone who sold his excess marijuana three or four times a week to help friends and make a little cash.

"We sell it everywhere," said a 17-year-old drug dealer from Reston, "everywhere you see people."

He and other teenagers had smoked and sold drugs routinely on a hill at Reston Town Center, he said. But that wasn't where he was caught. Police arrested him this year on a charge of possession with intent to distribute after they pulled him over during a routine traffic stop in Reston and found marijuana in the car.

In recent months, he said, he has bought drugs in Washington, in Laurel and near Iverson Mall in Prince

George's County. He would sell \$20 mini-bags at his high school, he said, in the bathrooms and by his locker. The boy said that during his freshman and sophomore years alone, he sold marijuana to 50 to 100 students.

He never saw marijuana smoking or selling "as a big deal," he said. "I still don't."

In fact, many of the teenagers saw no harm in marijuana. That perception is erroneous based on federal research that shows today's marijuana is as much as 10 times more potent than versions common 20 years ago. And teenagers didn't see themselves as dealers because their trafficking often occurred in social settings.

"We had parties in people's houses," another 17-year-old from Herndon said. "We had field parties in the summer, Great Falls Park, kids go there and get high. We had hotel parties all the time," with one member of the group renting a room for the night and inviting friends. "Any party I'd go to there would be drugs."

He called his business "little stints of selling," mostly marijuana and LSD, typically buying \$100 worth and making a quick \$50 from resales. He sold at parties and rave dance clubs in Washington and Baltimore. His customers: a total of about 50 youths in grades 10 to 12. The money, he said, was a nice supplement to what he was paid for working at a diner. His suppliers were "a guy 19 or 20 who lived in Herndon" and another who resided in Great Falls. "He always had a pound."

The smoking and selling stopped recently when he started to skip class and was caught by a school administrator. Suspicious, she asked him to empty his left pocket. He pulled out 20 hits of LSD. "She called the cops," he said.

In some areas of the 399-square-mile suburban county, drug dealing has more of an urban feel, as a pregnant 12-year-old from the Alexandria section of the county explained.

She was a marijuana- and crack-dealing apprentice to her older brother. "He's not a bad person," she said. "He's got to make a living for his kids. He doesn't have a high school diploma."

She packaged drugs in tiny baggies and wore black at night, "so if the police roll by, they can't see you." She was careful to stay away from someone else's turf. She could make \$500 to \$600 a night, she said, if she stayed out long enough.

"Will I sell again?" pondered the child, who initially was arrested on a charge of assault and battery. "If I need money to help my mom."

A 17-year-old Great Falls high school football player said he's not sure he could give drugs up. "I could live 40 years, but the thought of not having drugs or alcohol for 40 years is kind of scary."

At the Inova Kellar Center, a private, nonprofit treatment facility in Fairfax, weaning children from drugs has proven extraordinarily difficult, in part because of the close-knit nature of dealing. Giving up drugs can mean giving up friends. "We have to teach them to have activities outside of drugs," said Sheri Mitschelen, a program coordinator. "We have to brace them for returning back to the community."

### Rude Awakening

In one Fairfax neighborhood, a mother who thought she was savvy and found out she was anything but sounds the same message.

She got the word about a year ago at a Pampered Chefs party, one of those gatherings where neighbors get together to nibble refreshments and buy cookware.

Another mom pulled her aside in the kitchen and broke the news: Her 14-year-old daughter was bragging to other eighth-graders about smoking marijuana.

The girl's mother, 52, never thought her daughter -- an honor student and Division I soccer player -- would

consider using an illegal drug, much less at such a young age.

"Fourteen? It was just nowhere in my thought process, and I consider myself somewhat savvy," said the mother, a part-time college teacher.

Later that day, she and her 45-year-old husband, a pharmacist, confronted their daughter, who admitted it was true. "After she smoked the pot, she said, 'I have more friends now,'" her mother recalled. "That was scary."

Realizing other students were involved, and after agonizing for hours, the couple decided to turn in their daughter to school officials -- without telling her.

The next thing they knew, their daughter was calling from school, hysterical. "Mom, they found out!" she cried. She told her mother that she lied to school administrators at first but then spelled out what she had done in a "statement of facts."

"On Friday the 15th we were in Band class," when a friend gave her "a joint," she wrote. "He took it and showed it to me. I was like oh can I smoke it with you. He was like sure. We got on the bus and went to our separate homes. He called me later and then we went to smoke it around his house. I took like 4 puffs and he finished the rest."

Her parents sent her for a drug assessment that concluded she had been caught early in her use of pot. They also sent her to a therapist, to try to make sure she doesn't backslide. She was allowed to stay in school. But as word spread, other parents began keeping their children away. "She had one friend who came up and said, 'I can't be friends with you anymore,'" her mother said. "That was tough, boy."

Her mother also began to feel ostracized. "I just felt like the whole world knew, and they thought we were terrible parents."

Concerned that the neighborhood didn't have the full story, she decided to tell other parents what happened -- and broke the news at a New Year's Eve party.

"I told these parents" about her daughter and about the drugs that were at their children's school, the mother said. "They were dumbstruck that I was telling them this. I mean, I'm their PTA president."

Tomorrow: Why more teenagers are not caught.

### About the Reporting

To learn where and how Fairfax County teenagers get illegal drugs, The Washington Post interviewed 100 county teenagers over the last six months.

The teenagers, who agreed to talk about their drug use on condition of anonymity, came from three primary sources: the Fairfax County Juvenile Detention Center, private and county drug-treatment programs, and interviews at a local shopping mall.

Follow-up reporting with parents, school officials, drug counselors and law enforcement officers helped verify details of some of the teenagers' accounts and substantiated the broad themes laid out by most of the teenagers interviewed: that they deal drugs as well as use them, that teenagers operate with relative impunity and that adults responsible for children often are unaware of the extent of the drug trade.

Nearly all of the dozens of teenagers interviewed at the detention center, for example, were not there on drug charges. They were being held briefly on charges from vandalism to car theft, yet nearly all said they had used and distributed drugs regularly without detection by police or parents. Several of the dozens of teenagers randomly approached at the food court at Springfield Mall pulled out drugs and paraphernalia from their pockets during interviews.

A computerized database of juvenile charges filed in Fairfax County over the last year helped round out the information about teenagers involved with drugs. The records did not identify the teenagers by name but provided a demographic profile of the group by giving each age, race, school, drug charge and city or town.

The series was reported and written by Patricia Davis, a Metro reporter based in Fairfax, and Pierre Thomas, who was a National reporter covering the Justice Department for The Post before joining CNN as a correspondent.

The teenagers, most of whom were white, came from disparate backgrounds, yet their descriptions of teenage drug trafficking were strikingly similar. They also echoed what drug-treatment counselors say they hear from many of the hundreds of Fairfax teenagers they evaluate each year.