

Addiction in paradise: Seychelles battles heroin crisis

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The tiny island nation of Seychelles has rolled out methadone clinics in a bid to tackle snowballing heroin addiction

On a plain suburban street in Seychelles, far from the idyllic coastline and luxury resorts pampering honeymooners and paradise-seekers,

heroin addicts queue anxiously for their daily dose of methadone.

It is a scene few outsiders would associate with the tropical nirvana adrift in the Indian Ocean, and one rarely, if ever, glimpsed by tourists as they shuttle from the airport to five-star luxury on white-sand beaches.

But life for many Seychellois is far from picture perfect: the tiny archipelago nation is battling what officials say are the world's highest rates of heroin addiction.

Nearly 5,000 people are hooked, government figures show, equivalent to nearly 10 percent of the national workforce—a statistic that has startled the government into action.

In comparison, 0.4 percent of the global population consumed opioids in 2016, half of them in Asia, according to a United Nations report that puts Seychelles among the top consumers alongside producing countries such as Afghanistan.

The Seychelles' heroin boom, which took off over the past decade, gripped young and old alike and cut across class lines.

Among those queueing in the town of Les Mamelles for methadone—a substitute narcotic used to wean users off heroin—are parents with young children, an old man leaning on a cane and a taxi driver between shifts.

Graham Moustache, a 29-year-old father of two, described how the arrival of affordable and high-quality heroin in Seychelles swept up his entire family.

"I have four brothers and two sisters, and we have all been heroin addicts at one point," he told AFP, tracing his fingers over the needle scars on

his arms.

"I've been to prison twice," he said, adding his mother had turned him in as "she didn't know what to do any more".

"Sometimes, I didn't have enough to eat and I had to choose between eating and buying heroin. I chose heroin."

Soaring addiction

The rise of new trafficking routes through East Africa in the late 2000s, coupled with porous borders and relatively high purchasing power among Seychellois, flooded the paradisaal islands with heroin.

The average salary in the archipelago is \$420 (390)—high compared to other African nations.



Graham Moustache, 29, has been clean for two years after battling heroin addiction along with six of his siblings

The World Bank considers the Seychelles the only high-income country on the continent, thanks to the growing tourism industry.

But around 40 percent of the population still lives in poverty.

By 2011, around 1,200 people were addicted, prompting a punitive crackdown.

"We did not make a difference between the victim and the trafficker," said Patrick Herminie, director of the state-run Agency for Drug Abuse Prevention and Rehabilitation (APDAR).

By 2017, addiction had risen four-fold, placing Seychelles among the world's most drug-dependent nations.

The government, realising its war on drugs had failed, changed tack and declared a public health emergency.

"The magnitude of the problem is simply because we reacted a bit late," Herminie said.

Money has poured into combating the scourge, with state funds for drug prevention and rehabilitation programmes soaring to 75 million Seychelles rupees (\$5.5 million) in 2020—almost 10 times the 2016 budget.

APDAR, a specialist drug agency created in 2017 to tackle the problem, employs four times as many staff as the body that preceded it.

A state-run methadone programme has reached 2,500 people, with medical follow-ups helping to track their progress.

But the free availability of methadone has also prompted drug dealers to lower their prices.

Mobile clinics drive around offering methadone to addicts and providing free health checks and advice.

"I've been clean for more than a year. I found a job as a fisherman, and I can see my two kids," said Moustache proudly, as he queued at the white methadone van staffed with healthcare workers.

Others have struggled to stay the course.

"Methadone helps me a lot, but it's difficult not to take heroin at all,"

said Gisele Moumou, an emaciated 32-year-old addict, drawing ragged breaths and sweating as she waits for her small cup of methadone.



A state-run methadone programme has reached 2,500 people, with medical follow-ups helping to track their progress

Stopping the scourge

Schoolchildren are being taught about the damage done by drugs through awareness campaigns and billboards in classrooms.

But there is much work to be done, especially among children from families affected by drug use, says Noellie Gonthier from CARE, a local

harm-reduction charity.

"Sometimes, four- or five-year-olds at school mimic injecting heroin," she said.

"Our challenge is to make them understand that what they consider normal—because of their family context—actually isn't at all."

On Mahe, a small, mountainous island with lush vegetation, most of the population lives near the water. Life is quiet here, without traffic, and the streets are mostly clean.

Poverty is largely hidden, concentrated in a few neighbourhoods behind faded walls or in the hills.

So why do so many Seychellois take drugs? The authorities admit they haven't quite figured it out, but say it appears that while poverty does not quite allow people to live well, it allows them enough money to buy drugs to forget their woes.

"The root of the cause, we're still working on it," said Herminie.

Early studies show that health and social problems associated with heroin use have declined since the government switched its response from punishment to prevention, officials say.

Crime has nearly halved and annual cases of new hepatitis C infections have fallen 60 percent.

Youth unemployment, meanwhile, has shrunk from 6.5 percent to 2.1 percent in recent years.

One recovering addict, a taxi driver who did not want to be named,

offered a bleak assessment as he waited for his daily methadone in an empty car park in Les Mamelles.

"We're a small island in the middle of the ocean. What else is there to do here?" he said.

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