Heroin in the suburbs: Some experts see use on the rise

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The questioning last week of the eldest son of Eagles coach Andy Reid in Montgomery County and his alleged confession of heroin use has renewed attention to narcotics abuse by affluent suburbanites.

"These stories are not uncommon, but they still seem to shock people," said Jeremiah Daley, executive director of the Philadelphia County High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a law enforcement clearinghouse.

While national statistics indicate that heroin abuse has been steady in recent years, some Philadelphia-area drug-treatment experts say it appears to be on the rise.

"We're seeing a number of young, affluent kids getting themselves hooked on heroin," said Risa Vetri Ferman, first assistant district attorney in Montgomery County, where Garrett Reid, 23, was taken in for questioning after his Jeep Liberty reportedly was speeding, ran a red light, and crashed into a Ford sedan Tuesday in Plymouth Township. Police said Garrett Reid had acknowledged using heroin that day and possessed drug paraphernalia.

"I wouldn't call it an epidemic, but it's a trend," she said. She declined to speak specifically about Garrett Reid or his brother Britt, 21, whom police questioned after a separate road-rage confrontation in West Conshohocken the same day.

Kim Bowman, executive director of the Chester County Department of Drug and Alcohol Services, said she believed more young people were dabbling with the drug, which can be injected or inhaled in powder form.

In a survey of 2,839 Chester County high school seniors last year, Bowman said, 1.3 percent said they had used heroin the previous month - above the national average. Four years before, 0.3 percent admitted using the opiate.

Other law enforcement officials, however, say national statistics do not support the anecdotal accounts of regional officials.

"Heroin has been and continues to be a drug-trafficking and drug-abuse problem in the Philadelphia area," Daley said. "It has not changed much in the past eight to 10 years."

William R. Hocker, spokesman for the Philadelphia office of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, said heroin use appeared stable. "Heroin's a mainstay," he said. "It's always going to be there."

Most studies peg the number of Americans using heroin at a fraction of 1 percent. The federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration in 2004 estimated that 400,000 people

had used heroin the previous year, compared with 25.5 million marijuana and hashish users and 5.8 million cocaine users.

But heroin remains one of the most ferociously addictive drugs, and the tolerance that users develop with prolonged use can lead a two-bag-a-week dabbler to escalate into a 12-bag-a-day addict. A bag typically costs $10 to $20.

While heroin use may be steady, there was a dramatic increase in deaths last year tied to heroin spiked with the painkiller fentanyl.

In Philadelphia, about 70 people died last year from fentanyl-laced heroin, Hocker said.

In South Jersey, 133 people died between April and September from spiked heroin, half of them outside of Camden County, said Capt. Joe Bowen, with the Camden County Prosecutor's Office. Bowen said that heroin had lost much of its stigma, and that young suburbanites routinely ventured into Camden to score from street-corner dealers. "It's become more acceptable, more social," he said. "These young kids are not scared of heroin."

Lloyd D. Johnston, a researcher at the University of Michigan and principal investigator for its annual survey of drug abuse, said heroin use among teens increased in the early 1990s, when the purity rose and forms of heroin that could be snorted or inhaled became more widely available.

Johnston's survey found that reported heroin use among eighth graders jumped in the early 1990s, reaching 1.2 percent in 1994. Use later declined and is now stable at about 0.8 percent.

Some heroin users say they started out first abusing legal painkillers such as OxyContin, an opiate frequently prescribed for patients recovering from surgery or injuries.

Most experts say the common impression of a heroin user as a destitute urban dweller is out of date.

"Our perception of an addict is someone who shoots dope, is homeless, and has lost everything," said **William J. Lorman**, clinical director of residential services at the **Livengrin Foundation** in Bensalem. "That is becoming less and less the case. We are seeing more middle-class working folks, young adults."

In that sense, the case of Garrett Reid is unusual only in that his father is a famous football coach, known as a practicing Mormon. The faith forbids use of alcohol, caffeine and drugs.

"It's sad that the Reid family has to deal with a substance-abuse problem in its midst with all the media attention," Daley said. "It's sadder still how may thousands of other families in the Delaware Valley have to deal with this every day."

Authorities served a search warrant Tuesday at Reid's home in Villanova. They said they had seized a shotgun and a handgun, along with containers of white powder or residue from a vehicle.

No charges have been filed against either of Reid's sons, and officials said their investigation was continuing. Police said they were waiting for drug and toxicology test results.

Warning Signs of Possible Heroin Use

Unkempt appearance
Apathy and lethagy
Change in personality or academic performance
Unexplained possession of cash or valuables
Withdrawal from friends or activities
Excess or sudden sleep
Runny nose
Slurred speech
Eyes that appear "lost" or have a faraway look
Diarrhea, vomiting, or feelings of chill

SOURCE: Heroin Awareness Foundation; Palo Alto Medical Foundation