

CRIME

On Route 23, or 'Heroin Highway,' a growing suburban demand for drugs meets urban supply

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The 53-mile stretch of highway dubbed “Heroin Highway” was once a route for transporting iron ore and timber from North Jersey's western highlands to bustling commercial districts in the east.

Today, Route 23 facilitates the movement of goods in the opposite direction, linking an urban supply of heroin and other narcotics to growing suburban and rural demand.

Heroin moves up and down the winding highway — through woodlands and shopping centers — in both bags and veins.

Local police find it when they pull over a car or respond to a store burglary or revive a slumped-over body in a parking lot by Route 23.

“If our residents, and residents of towns north of us, do not travel to Paterson to purchase drugs, we wouldn’t be in this situation that we’re sitting in,” said Christopher Vergano, Wayne’s mayor, a day after a Sussex County man crashed into a gas station on Route 23 and killed three people.

The driver, Jason Vanderee, required a dose of naloxone, a drug that reverses the effects of an opioid overdose and is more commonly known by the brand name Narcan, at the scene. Police said they found a used hypodermic needle and several bags of heroin, one of them empty, in his car.

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In January, Wayne police pulled over a New York man driving on Route 23 with 99 packets of heroin. In November, police arrested two men on heroin possession charges within two days. One motor vehicle stop in 2017 yielded 44 bags of heroin, crack cocaine and a knife. Two stops in 2016 resulted in the arrests of multiple people driving under the influence.

“What we’re finding is that people from Sussex County and up north come down to Paterson, pick up the stuff and come back,” said Lt. Mike Moeller of the Butler Police Department. “The northbound side is where we usually catch them, because they’re coming back with the stuff.”

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Police patrolling the highway say they make arrests for heroin and other drugs multiple times a week, sometimes even daily. The frequency has increased in recent years, said Lt. Dan Comune of the Pequannock Police Department.

“We’ve seen a pretty good upswing as far as the numbers go,” Comune said. “Officers are out there doing the best they can, but the higher volume of opiates and heroin being used and going up and down the highway means, unfortunately, you can’t get everybody.”

The fatal car crash in Wayne almost felt like tragedy waiting to happen, Comune said.

“If things continue to go the way they’re going, I can’t see anything else but that happening again at some point,” he said.

A state investigation into prescription pill and heroin abuse singled out Route 23 as a heavily traveled drug corridor in 2013. The report noted that the highway, which runs from rural Sussex County through the affluent communities of northern Morris County and into Passaic and Essex counties, had become known as “Heroin Highway.”

Richard Jasterzbski, a Wayne councilman, said it pains him to hear locals use the nickname.

“It’s a horrible feeling to be a representative of the town and have a portion of the town that I live in and love and respect have nicknames to that effect,” Jasterzbski said. “It’s very disheartening, very disappointing.”

Five years ago, Wayne police created a special enforcement unit to more stealthily patrol

The unit uses patrol cars with reflective ghost lettering on the sides to camouflage police on the road, resulting in more arrests.

Officers look for normal traffic infractions such as speeding and use license plate readers to check for unregistered license plates and suspended driver's licenses, Clarke said.

Police are also trained to spot drivers under the influence, who typically exhibit signs of impairment by weaving from lane to lane, driving without headlights on, speeding up and slowing down at inappropriate times and running red lights. Once pulled over, their sweating, shaking bodies betray the drugs coursing through their system.

Many shoot up as soon as they score, Comune said.

“Unfortunately, it seems like when people buy heroin, the appeal of it, the draw of it, is so strong that they can't even make it home,” he said. “They're using it before they even leave wherever they buy it from.”

Those who manage to wait often end up getting their fix in one of the strip malls, gas stations, restaurants and large retailers lining Route 23 in Passaic and Morris counties.

“They stop and use the Walmart parking lot on their way back from cities and they'll shoot up right there,” said Kevin Smith, chief of Riverdale police. “It's no secret in Riverdale that we're out on the highway quite frequently.”

The big-box stores — Walmart, Best Buy, Target, Home Depot and Lowe's — are also an attraction for addicts heading south in search of quick drug money before they reach Paterson, Passaic or Newark.

“Oftentimes, they're stopping here on their way down, stealing something, hitting the pawnshops at the bottom of [Route] 23 and then going and buying their drugs,” Smith said. “We get all these drug addicts looking to shoplift in our stores, and quite frankly, they're not very good at it and they get caught.”

The Riverdale Police Department responds to reports of shoplifting almost every day, he said. Most are drug-related.

Smith blames lax regulation at local pawnshops, which he said have loose standards for identification and move goods too quickly, for exacerbating the problem.

“I want to see positive ID for everyone and not being able to sell whatever they buy for at least a week, putting a hold on it,” he said. “The pawnshops move it out so fast that when we go

down there and try to look, it's already gone.”

About 23 percent of narcotics arrests in Paterson last year were made up of out-of-towners, according to a count of the city's police blotters. In 2016, about 28 percent of arrests were of outsiders. Those arrested last year hailed from towns as far north as Cuddebackville, New York, and as far south as Atlantic City.

Laurence Martin, a Wayne police captain, said Route 23 is not unique in the role that it plays in Paterson's narcotics trade. Routes 80 and 46 are similarly notorious for both motor vehicle stops that lead to drug arrests and people driving while intoxicated.

“I know Paterson Narcotics is doing a bang-up job, but it's just a very difficult task,” Martin said. “We have personnel working at peak hours on the roads to make it safer for people to go to work, to go to school, go to the mall, go to the store, but it's something we've been wrestling with for quite some time.”

Jerry Speziale, Paterson's police director, said the region's opioid pipeline runs through New York City, Routes 80 and 81 and Luzerne County in Pennsylvania. It feeds suppliers not just in Paterson, but in cities like Hackensack, too.

Paterson police target dealers, manufacturing mills and distribution cells, arresting 30 to 50 people a week, but the flow of heroin continues unabated, he said.

“We are going after it vigorously, but as long as there is a demand, and a high demand, there will always be a supply,” Speziale. “It's taking addict lives and it's now starting to take others' lives.”

Staff Writer Philip DeVencentis contributed to this article.

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