

Japan Faces Widespread Drug Problem, Takes Harsh Measures Against Abusers

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TOKYO—Tsuneo Kondo was a model worker, on the fast track in the management of a ferry company in northern Japan. But to escape the stress of the job, he started mainlining methamphetamine, a powerful and addictive stimulant drug known as speed.

"At first I told myself I was using it for work," he says. "Then I started living for it, and losing my mind."

Soon he was lying, cheating, borrowing and stealing to cover his habit. His company fired him. His family sent him to a mental hospital. The police put him in jail. But the craving for the needle continued.

Mr. Kondo is one of hundreds of thousands of Japanese whose lives have been wrecked by methamphetamine. While heroin is the scourge of Western societies, speed is the drug of choice in Japan, where its widespread use belies the notion that the postwar economic miracle was built on an antiseptic social order.

As Many as 600,000

Every year Japanese police arrest more than 20,000 people, most of them users, for violating drug laws. Only manpower shortages limit the arrests, authorities say. Experts estimate that as many as 600,000 Japanese take speed.

The addicts are on the fringes of Japanese society. They are the dispossessed: small-time gangsters, bar hostesses and prostitutes. They are the weary and overworked: truck drivers, construction workers and night laborers. They are the bored and curious: teen-agers, students and housewives. But that could change.

"In absolute terms, stimulant abuse may not be as great in Japan as in other countries," says Francisco Ramos Galino, director of the United Nations Narcotic Drugs Division. "But we're seeing a steady increase over the past few years."

Speed is pouring into Japan from underground factories in Taiwan. Japanese authorities say, bringing the potential for an explosion in stimulant abuse. During 1987's first 10 months, Japanese police seized more than 1,200 pounds of imported speed, most of it from Taiwan, with a street value of about 100 billion yen (\$760 million). The amount was nearly twice that seized in all of 1986 and six times the annual level of five years ago. Much more is coming in undetected, a rich trade that provides Japanese crime syndicates with nearly half their income, police say.

Getting People Hooked

"We're afraid that with this kind of volume on the streets there's going to be an explosion in the number of users," says Yoshitake Shimada, chief of the National Police Agency's drug-control office. "The price is starting to drop, and pushers can give it away to get people started."

Japanese authorities are coping by administering harsh punishments to speed users. "We want to create an environment where there won't be anybody buying the drug," says Isao Morita, the chief drug investigator in the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department. "If there's no market for it, the sellers can't subsist."

Behind the punitive approach is a strong view that drug takers are evil, rather than ill. Japanese don't accept the common Western belief that drug abuse is as much the fault of society as of the individual.

"Speed addicts are simply bad people," says Tsuguro Kaneko, deputy director of Tokyo's Matsuzawa Mental Hospital, a public institution that treats alcoholism and drug dependency. "I think they're

more likely to be cured in prison than in a hospital. We're too easy on them."

While most first offenders are given suspended sentences unless they are caught selling speed, simply using the drug can bring a prison sentence of as long as 10 years. Addicts are routinely jailed or committed to mental institutions, then released without a safety net to prevent them from resuming their habit.

Breaking the Cycle

Mr. Kondo, the fallen ferry executive, was a rare exception. He broke his cycle of dependence when a judge sentenced him to probation on the condition that he attend an Alcoholics Anonymous program run by a Maryknoll priest.

He cheated at first, sneaking into the men's room during meetings to shoot up, tormented by the hallucinations that beset recovering speed users. He finally quit seven years ago and now runs Japan's only live-in rehabilitation center for indigent people with drug problems.

"You need someone to give you a push in the beginning," says the 46-year-old Mr. Kondo, a scruffy, bearded man with a ruddy face and droopy eyes. "Nobody does that in Japan."

His year-old Drug Addiction Rehabilitation Center is housed in a ramshackle Tokyo warehouse. About 15 people live at the center, where they attend meetings patterned after the Narcotics Anonymous program, an offshoot of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement of the U.S.

Residents of the center gathered around a polka-dot folding table on a recent afternoon, chain-smoking cigarettes and drinking cup after cup of weak coffee in their daily ritual of speaking about their experiences. "Speed ruined my mind and my body," says the 24-year-old son of a construction-company president. Others describe how drug-taking began as a social activity but deteriorated into a lonely compulsion.

Japanese Riddle

Why Japanese drug abusers prefer stimulants over opiates is a riddle. Japan's harsh drug laws apply equally to heroin and methamphetamines, yet only 49 people were arrested on heroin charges in 1986.

Popular wisdom holds that the Japanese are a nation of workaholics with a natural predilection for stimulants. For example, there is a vast market for caffeine-loaded vitamin drinks.

Widespread methamphetamine use started during World War II, when the government supplied it to soldiers and factory workers in the belief it would strengthen morale and stamina. After the war, speed was readily available without a prescription.

Illegal speed factories sprang up when the government banned the drug, and a police crackdown peaked in 1954 with more than 50,000 arrests. A brief heroin epidemic followed in the late 1950s and early 1960s but was crushed by the aggressive prosecution of addicts.

Japan's underground methamphetamine chemists moved their operations to South Korea and elsewhere in Asia to escape prosecution at home. But tougher enforcement by South Korean authorities prompted a shift in production to Taiwan several years ago.

Taiwan's underworld, most notably an organization called the Bamboo Union, has been active in the trade in a loose alliance with the organized Japanese gangs called *yakuza*, Japanese police say. The distributors are mostly the soldiers or associates of gangs who sell partly to support their own habits and partly for high profits, police say.