

U.S. teens turning to heroin as a cheaper high

By Tim Johnson, McClatchy Newspapers

EL DURAZNO, Mexico – Mexico's heroin industry has had a bullish few years, and for traffickers the outlook is as uplifting as the scarlet, orange and yellow poppy flowers from which the narcotic is processed.

What was once a problem largely confined to hubs in California and Texas, Mexican traffickers have expanded into the Midwest and the Atlantic Seaboard, narcotics experts say.

Using savvy marketing tactics, they've also repositioned heroin commercially, revamping its image from the inner-city drug of yore, with its junkies and needles, into a narcotic that can be snorted or smoked, appealing to suburban and even rural high school youth.

A coincidental factor has given the drug gangs a tail wind: The epidemic abuse of painkillers has ebbed in the United States, and youth now hunger for a cheaper high.

"We've heard around the country of changes away from prescription drugs, because they are either more expensive or more difficult to obtain, and a movement toward heroin, which is less costly," said Gil Kerlikowske, a former Seattle police chief who's the White House drug czar.

The U.S. State Department said in March that Mexico has surpassed Myanmar as the world's second largest poppy cultivator and produces 7 percent of the world's heroin, mostly for the U.S. market. The State Department and the United Nations say that Mexican poppy production has nearly tripled since 2007, though Mexico strongly disputes that estimate.

What's indisputable is that drug syndicates that produce black tar and brown heroin in Mexico's Sierra Madre mountains are pushing aggressively into areas where they haven't been active before.

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