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## THE HEROIN ROAD

### **Black tar moves in, and death follows**

**Dealers work systematically, pushing heroin in areas where users are unprepared for its potency.**

By Sam Quinones

*Second Of Three Parts*

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Reporting from Huntington, W.V.

On a Monday in September 2007, Teddy Johnson went to his son's apartment.

Adam Johnson, 22, was in his first year at Marshall University in Huntington. A history major, he played guitar, drums and bass, loved glam bands like the New York Dolls and hosted "The Oscillating Zoo," an eclectic rock show on the university radio station.

Teddy hadn't heard from his son in three days. Letting himself into the apartment, he found Adam lying lifeless on his bed, in the same shirt he'd seen him wearing three days earlier.

The cause of death: a heroin overdose.

"I had no clue," said the elder Johnson, a plumbing contractor in Huntington. "We're a small town. We weren't prepared."

The death was part of a rash of overdoses, 12 of them fatal, that shook Huntington that fall and winter. All were caused by black-tar heroin, a potent, inexpensive, semi-processed form of the drug that has spread across the United States, driven by the entrepreneurial energy and marketing savvy of immigrants from a tiny farming county in Mexico.

Immigrants from Xalisco, in the Pacific coast state of Nayarit, Mexico, have brought the heroin north over the last decade, and with it a highly effective business model featuring deep discounts and convenient delivery by car. Their success is a major reason why Mexican black tar has seized a growing share of the U.S. heroin market, according to government estimates.

Xalisco networks are decentralized, with no all-powerful boss, and they largely avoid guns and violence. Staying clear of the nation's largest cities, where established organizations control the heroin trade, Xalisco dealers have cultivated markets in the mountain states and parts of the

Midwest and Appalachia, often creating demand for heroin in cities and towns where there had been little or none. In many of those places, authorities report a sharp rise in heroin overdoses and deaths.

Before the string of fatal overdoses in 2007, "we didn't even consider heroin an issue," said Huntington Police Chief Skip Holbrook.

Xalisco dealers have been particularly successful in areas where addiction to prescription painkillers like OxyContin was widespread. Many of those addicts, mainly young middle- and working-class whites, switched to black tar, which is cheaper and more powerful.

In York County, S.C., pain-pill addicts became hooked on black tar purchased in Charlotte, N.C., half an hour away. "We used to get maybe one overdose death a year" caused by opiates, said Marvin Brown, commander of the county's drug unit. "We had six in the first six months" of 2009.

In the suburbs south of Salt Lake City, heroin was unheard of until dealers from Xalisco arrived, said Lt. Phil Murphy of the Utah County Major Crimes Task Force. Now, he said, young people looking for an alternative to pain pills drive to Salt Lake to score black-tar heroin.

University towns have been especially fertile markets for Xalisco heroin. Authorities in Boulder and Fort Collins, Colo. -- home to the University of Colorado and Colorado State University, respectively -- report increased overdoses caused by black-tar heroin purchased from dealers in Denver.

Ohio has also become a center of Xalisco networks, and it was through a junkie in Columbus that black tar made its way to Huntington.

### **Innovative, tireless**

Huntington, a struggling former railroad depot and coal distribution center, has long had a flourishing trade in crack cocaine and other drugs. But there was never much heroin until dealers from Xalisco arrived in Columbus, 160 miles north.

They were innovative and tireless. Rather than sell from houses, where they would be sitting ducks for narcotics agents, or on street corners in seedy neighborhoods, they operated like a pizza delivery service. Users called a phone number. A dispatcher relayed the order to a driver, who took the heroin to the customer.

The drivers circulated around the city with doses of heroin in small uninflated balloons, each the size of a pencil eraser, which they kept hidden in their mouths. No sale was too small.

"There's nobody who'll drive across . . . Columbus to bring you one \$20 balloon, but they would," Wendy Keller, who became addicted to their heroin, said in a telephone interview from a federal prison in Lexington, Ky., where she is serving a five-year term for conspiracy to distribute heroin.

Competition among Xalisco networks kept prices low. OxyContin pills cost \$80 apiece and addicts needed five or six a day. Black-tar heroin was stronger and cost less than \$50 for a day's fix.

By 2007, black-tar addiction had spread across Columbus, Dayton, Cleveland and other Ohio cities. At Columbus-based Maryhaven, Ohio's largest drug-treatment center, opiate addicts made up 20% of the center's patients in 1997, and many were addicted to prescription painkillers. Today, 70% are black-tar heroin addicts, said Paul Coleman, Maryhaven's president.

Xalisco heroin also penetrated the well-to-do suburbs of Delaware County, Ohio. Demand for treatment is now so great that Maryhaven recently set up a satellite clinic for heroin users there, Coleman said.

Rural Athens, Vinton, Meigs and Hawking counties have seen a tenfold increase in heroin addicts seeking treatment over the last four years, and almost all were black-tar users, said Joe Gay, director of Health Recovery Services, a drug-rehabilitation center serving those Ohio counties.

"When you see these increases, you ask why," Gay said. "The answer is availability and price. Heroin was never available in these rural counties, and now it's cheap and plentiful."

### **Hitting on addicts**

Rick Jordan was an addict living in Columbus and, like many West Virginians, he kept close ties to his hometown, Huntington.

Family members say he and his wife Kandace met Xalisco dealers in Columbus in 1998. The couple were trying to kick an addiction to prescription opiates and had sought help at a drug-treatment center.

"The Mexicans would sit out in the parking lot, getting guys who were trying to kick," said Jordan's daughter, Tesina Ventola.

Soon the Jordans were hooked again, on cheap black tar. Rick began calling the Mexicans every day. His toddler grandchildren came to believe that the dealers were doctors, because Jordan and his wife seemed to feel better after their visits, said Ventola, the children's mother.

Around 2004, friends from Huntington began calling Jordan, hearing that he had a connection to cheap heroin. Jordan would call the Xalisco dealers. In Huntington, heroin then cost \$50 per tenth of a gram and was usually diluted Colombian white powder.

Jordan would buy three balloons for \$50 and keep one for himself. He'd sell the other two to a friend from Huntington for \$50. The friend would return to Huntington, sell one of the balloons for \$50 and keep the other for himself.

"That's where it all began," Ventola said.

Word spread through Huntington. By mid-2007, addicts were making pilgrimages to Jordan's wood-frame house west of downtown Columbus, sometimes carrying thousands of dollars in cash.

One of them was Michelle Byars, who had gotten hooked on pain pills after a back injury and switched to black-tar heroin.

"I'd show up and other people from Huntington would already be there," Byars, 34, recalled in a telephone interview from a federal prison in Connecticut.

One of the alleged Xalisco dealers in Columbus was a young man whom junkies called Carlos and whom police later identified as Juan Hernandez-Salazar (one of many aliases he has used).

His heroin was 70% pure, said Bobby Melrose, who described himself as a longtime drug user.

"I'd use two or three bags of dope to just get well, and not even reach the same high as one bag of Carlos'," Melrose said in an interview at a federal prison in Kentucky.

Via Jordan, this potent heroin got to Huntington, where addicts had little tolerance for it. Users began overdosing, and some of them died.

One was Patrick Byars, husband of Michelle Byars.

The same weekend Adam Johnson died, the Byars shot up together. Michelle woke up. Patrick didn't.

Nor did Teddy Mays. A former tire shop owner, Mays had grown addicted to OxyContin prescribed for back and knee pain. Then black tar came along. He had both in his system when he died, said Cindy Mays, his widow.

Dana Helmondollar Jr., 32, an electrical company lineman, made the same switch and met the same end, said his father.

"We were getting almost one [911 call] a day," said Gordon Merry, director of emergency medical services for Cabell County. "It taxed everyone: the EMS system, hospitals, law enforcement."

The media reported that black-tar heroin was sweeping through town, killing users. That "made people want it more," said Paul Hunter, a Huntington police narcotics officer. "Addicts are always looking for the best high."

A drug task force traced the heroin to Jordan, Carlos and his network in Columbus. In the spring and summer of 2008, authorities arrested 19 Huntington addicts -- Jordan's best customers.

Michelle Byars pleaded guilty to supplying her husband with the heroin that killed him. She is scheduled to be released from prison in 2014.

Melrose is serving a five-year term for heroin distribution. Doctors amputated his right leg

because of gangrene and abscesses caused by shooting black tar into the leg.

Jordan died in a Huntington jail in July 2008.

Carlos spent a year on the run, then was arrested in Columbus last June after running a stop sign. He is awaiting trial, charged as Joel Borjas-Hernandez with conspiracy to distribute heroin that resulted in the deaths of others. If convicted, he faces 20 years to life in prison.

### **Unabated horror**

Adam Johnson's childhood bedroom is still filled with his belongings: guitars, basses and a sound mixer; T-shirts of John Lennon and Yoko Ono and the New York Dolls; a Winnie the Pooh doll in which he hid his heroin.

Teddy Johnson buried his son across a hilltop cemetery lane from Huntington's most hallowed spot, a memorial to Marshall University football team members who were killed in a plane crash in 1970.

Johnson had a concrete bench installed and he visits three times a week to sit on the bench and think of his son.

Not long after Carlos' network was busted, a new group of Xalisco dealers went into business in Columbus. Federal officials say the trade in Xalisco heroin remains robust.