

Low prices, high demand keep crack trade humming

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SANTA CRUZ — Someone is making a lot of money.

On the street corners of Santa Cruz, in cars and the back rooms of houses, hundreds of thousands of dollars are being passed hand-to-hand in exchange for small rocks of crack cocaine.

The profit margin in crack is huge. A \$10,000 investment in powdered cocaine can yield more than \$90,000 in profit after it is converted to crack and sold on the street.

Crack is a hybrid form of cocaine smoked in a pipe. Cocaine generally comes in a powdered form that is either snorted or mixed with water and injected intravenously.

To make crack, the powdered cocaine is mixed with baking soda and boiled in water. The cocaine, which is water soluble, adheres to the baking soda, forming small pebbles or "rocks" of nearly pure cocaine, which is then ready to smoke. Crack gives users a faster and "higher" high than powdered cocaine and is also considered more addictive.

"The process is so easy a third-grader can do it," said Jim Johnson, a County Narcotics Enforcement Team agent, "and then you have your crack."

A crack rock is sold on the street for \$15 to \$20. (In some big cities, small amounts are available for as little as \$5.) According to Johnson, there are usually five or more rocks per gram and when multiplied by the number of ounces in a kilo, approximately 5,000 rocks worth about \$90,000 can be produced.

Crack, according to published reports, came out of Oakland more than 10 years ago. Law officers at first did not know what to make of the off-white pebbles of cocaine. At the time, cocaine use was primarily powder.

In the early 1980s, however, the cocaine cognoscenti turned to freebasing to get their high. Using ether, alcohol and blowtorches, they burned cocaine in glass pipes and inhaled the fumes. Freebasing enabled the cocaine to enter the bloodstream faster and in greater quantities. It also used much more cocaine; habits could cost thousands of dollars per day. It was also dangerous.

"A lot of people were using ether (to freebase)," Johnson said. "and a lot of them were blowing up. They would get so messed up they couldn't do it right. Now all you need is a match and a pipe."

Crack made freebasing available to anyone with \$20. It was however, a glut on the market and a drop in the wholesale price of cocaine that really enabled

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the crack epidemic to take hold.

"We're negotiating for \$9,000 per kilo (of cocaine)," said Marty London, special agent in charge of the San Jose office of the Drug Enforcement Administration. "A year ago it was \$24,000 a kilo, and that's not a border price (which can be lower)."

In the past, most of the cocaine was smuggled into the United States from South America through Florida and other southern states. The current trend, according to London, is for the cocaine shipments to be smuggled across the border from Mexico. Los Angeles is starting to rival Miami as the cocaine capital of the country.

It is estimated that from the time a kilo of cocaine crosses the border until it reaches the streets of Santa Cruz as crack, it may pass through the hands of only three to four dealers.

"The amount of money (to be made in cocaine), is beyond comprehension," London said.

Thus far, the so-called war on drugs has had little, if any, effect on the cocaine trade.

"There seems to be as much drugs on the street now as when the war started," London said. "The more people we throw at the problem, the more arrests we end up with, but there are just as many drugs on the street."

"As long as people want it and there is a market for it, it's going to be there," Johnson said. "There is going to be someone making a buck, even if you imposed automatic life sentences (for dealing), it wouldn't stop."