Crack cocaine has given the media material for many sensational stories. This supposed inherently evil substance very quickly became the scourge of the nation by the late 1980s. The white powder that is being converted into "rocks" has been given exclusive credit for the social and personal downfall of "inner city" (a term that has become synonymous with "black") youth. Although most Americans have never seen — up close and in person — cocaine (or any other illegal drug), the media has provided, on a daily basis, all they need to know. When President Bush himself showed them a bag of crack on TV, the public's concern-turned-hysteria provided unquestioning support for intensifying the war on drugs.

Media Myth

Women's use of crack has provided even better media stories. The moral fiber of society, it is argued, is threatened by the violation of two powerful cultural mores that women are supposed to protect: sexual virtue and motherhood. We are told that women who use crack become sex-crazed; "tossups" or "strawberries" who lie around crack houses indulging in all kinds of promiscuous sex, including bestiality. Journalists tell us that men crack users report crack makes women so sexually excitable they will do anything. The implications for sexually transmitted diseases are obvious.

After sex comes babies, and with babies, motherhood. On this subject we have learned, through the media, that crack mothers abuse their children. They give their children drugs. Some even put crack in the baby's bottle!

In sum, we "know" from reading the paper and watching TV that after one hit of crack, women take off their clothes and have sex with anyone, including the family pet. Subsequently, they beat their children, add crack to their babies' formulas; and for those children who are not already using it, they blow crack smoke in their faces. To make a long story short, women crack users are amoral animals, lacking a conscience.

As sociologists, we are suspicious of media reports and stereotypes about crack. Over the past decade, we have observed the often vast differences between media reports and our research findings about women heroin addicts, methadone maintenance, "ecstasy" (recently outlawed by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration), and middle-class cocaine use. Last summer, we set out to do a three-year study (funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse) of women and
Women And Crack: What's The Real Story?

Written by Marsha Rosenbaum
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cocaine. Unlike journalists, we have the luxury of taking our time. We do in-depth interviews that last three hours. By the end of the study, we will have completed 125 such interviews. Currently, we have interviewed 45 women, and although our analysis is preliminary, it merits some attention.

Crack and Sex

Do women lose control sexually? Most of our respondents do not admit to sexual abandon, but usually know others who do. Women's motivation, however, seems to be financial rather than physiological. The majority of our respondents report that crack actually reduces their desire to have sex, rather than the other way around. Those women who admit to "toss-up" behavior express feelings of extreme embarrassment and humiliation. They are aware of the stigma associated with the "sex-for-crack" dynamic and would rather not be participating in it. Yet they feel helpless to resist the urge to do more crack once they are high and will trade almost anything for it once they have started.

The power structure, hence the interpersonal dynamic, in the crack world is male-dominated. The men hold the drugs and have the money. Women crack users, rather than sexually stimulated, are stimulated by the desire for more crack. When they run out of money, if (and this is variable) they want to go on using crack, they cash in on the only remaining commodity left to them — their bodies. Those women who exchange sex for crack are prostituting themselves, and this occupation is not new, particularly among drug abusers and addicts. The only new twist is that prostitutes traditionally exchange sex for money and then use the money to buy drugs. With crack, some women cut out the money, exchanging sexual favors directly for drugs. Prostitution is, of course, the "oldest profession." It is not gender-specific, and men will do the same, given equal conditions and opportunities. These fellows are called "raspberries," but they have not as yet been the subject of media reports.

Crack and Mothering

As mothers, crack users share basic American parenting values. They express a great deal of concern for their children, even if they cannot always demonstrate techniques commonly agreed upon as exhibiting good mothering. A major problem faced by crack-using mothers is financial. Mothers receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children benefits experience problems endemic to raising children in poverty. They live in inadequate, unsafe housing, have no respite and receive negative or non-existent social support. They cannot simultaneously support a crack
habit and children. Yet they often try, for a period, to do both. The problem is not always simply financial.

The crack scene is all-consuming, and women become inundated in it. Thus even when they have money (albeit meager amounts), they become enveloped in the lifestyle — "cracked" — and their entire orientation centers around cocaine.

It is our impression, based on these preliminary findings, that non-deliberate neglect is a more appropriate term for the mother-child relationship than abuse. We have not found evidence of exceptional physical abuse. These women are not monsters. They do not hate their kids, and they do not hit their kids any more than their counterparts who do not use crack. And given the high cost of drugs, they certainly do not share that expensive commodity with their kids. Sadly, while on a crack binge, the children are ignored. These women are aware that they are hurting their children, as evidenced by the fact that many in our population voluntarily gave their children to relatives because they doubted their own ability to take care of them.

Like women heroin addicts a decade before them, women crack users are considered to be more "deviant" than their male counterparts. They are perceived to be not only loose women, but bad mothers — a stigma transcending time and culture. We wondered what they were really like. Could they be this bad? We learned from the women that they are tough. They are neither stupid nor pushovers. They do not like to talk about sex, but do maintain that men — both crack-using men and those men reporting on the crack scene — are exaggerating its importance as the motivation behind women's sexual activities. It is not that the stories about sex do not have some credibility, but they are exaggerated. They do not represent all women all of the time.

Although certainly a powerful substance, crack's main role in the lives of many of these women is to exacerbate a situation that is already terrible. Life is difficult for anyone who is single, trying to survive on AFDC and living in a small, often unfurnished, apartment in a housing project, homeless shelter or hotel. With no job or job skills and little education, they are locked into poverty.

Once again, it is not simply drugs that account for incidences of prostitution and child neglect. (Ten years ago it was heroin that was to blame, now it's crack, and 10 years from now it will be something else.) Crack may aggravate the situation, but take drugs away, and these conditions still exist. Thus, these socioeconomic conditions, not drugs, drive women (and men) to act in
ways counter to society's sense of how people should live their lives.