BR has cocaine reputation, officials say

By SONNY ALBARADO and JOE SCALE
Advocate staff writers

Baton Rouge apparently has more cocaine flowing through it than most cities its size, but it is not considered to be a major distribution point, according to local narcotics officials.

"Baton Rouge does have a reputation as a big cocaine city," said Dick Gunouda, an agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration office in Baton Rouge.

"It's not really a source city. It's a big user city. Until recently, in this area it has been confined to the affluent, but within the last couple of years it has cut deep into the blue-collar section," he said.

All local narcotics agents agree that cocaine is no longer the rich man's drug. Particularly in Baton Rouge, it now crosses all social and economic backgrounds.

Capt. John Welborn, head of the police department's narcotics unit, said a number of factors make Baton Rouge a major cocaine market. Some of the factors include the proximity to the coast and river, a sound economy and a sizable affluent community.

"All these things combine to make Baton Rouge just a little more than average in the use of cocaine and other drugs," he said.

Proximity to the coast and river puts Baton Rouge on the border of smuggling entry points. A good economy and affluent community are factors because of the high cost of cocaine.

"Most of the users of cocaine in this town are people with reasonably good jobs, relatively young people who like to party," Welborn said.

Cocaine is popular because its effect is not as noticeable as other drugs and it has no image of being as dangerous as narcotics, agents say.

Most cocaine sold in Baton Rouge is sold in grams or half-ounce packets. According to Welborn and W. F. Fourrier, chief of the sheriff's narcotics division.

A gram sells for between $120 and $125, but has been known to go as high as $135, he said. Fourrier and Welborn estimated the cost of an ounce, enough to fill a baby's food jar, to be about $2,250 locally.

Some large smuggling operations have used Baton Rouge as a base, but for the most part, Baton Rouge's cocaine business consists of people bringing in pounds or kilograms (2.5 pounds) from out-of-state and splitting them into smaller amounts for retail sale here, Welborn said.

"We believe that a lot of cocaine is trafficked into Baton Rouge," he said. "We do have some local people who deal it, but we don't have big-time smuggling operations like they do in Florida." But Welborn added:

"This town does have a lot of capability for smuggling in the future. All the conditions exist."

There is also evidence to indicate that money made from cocaine smuggling is being laundered into legitimate businesses in Baton Rouge, especially through dummy corporations where it is laundered and then put into legitimate service, he said.

"We think there's a good bit of it being used. It's just not on a large scale as it is in other places like Miami," he said.

Most cocaine used in Baton Rouge comes from Florida, although narcotics agents believe that increasing pressure from law enforcement there has caused drug traffickers to start using Louisiana. Recently, narcotics agents have been arresting more people in recent years, whom they believe are attempting to set up trafficking centers here because the competition was too stiff in Florida.

Fourrier also said that a certain amount of the cocaine used in Baton Rouge is brought in by wealthy local entrepreneurs who make periodic trips into source countries and come back with whatever cocaine they can get. The largest amount of cocaine city police have confiscated was a pound, Welborn said. That case involved a Cuban smuggling 500 pounds of marijuana to move his distribution network from Florida to Baton Rouge.

But police have become a more active in undercover operations involving purchasing grams, larger because that is all police can afford to buy, Welborn said.

Fourrier also said that his office does not have the money to buy its way high up the dealer chain.

There have, however, been a number of arrests and subsequent convictions involving more than an ounce, he said.

Welborn said cocaine arrests seem to be down every year. So far this year, his office has worked about 30 cocaine cases, he said.

The quality of cocaine coming into Baton Rouge has been mediocre to excellent, ranging anywhere from 20 to 80 percent pure. Fourrier said that skill of the user is the key to the amount the lower the quality. Users who buy cocaine by the gram are probably not buying much cocaine for their money, he said.

"The user's nose can't tell the difference between 20 percent and 40 percent. The high he gets depends on physical and psychological factors related to when and how it's used," he said.

Cocaine is mixed - or cut - with various white powders, but the most popular cutting agent, one is lactose and the other is an antihistamine. Most cutting agents are available over the counter in any pharmacy.

Most users in Baton Rouge take the drug by inhaling it through their nostrils, a practice variously called sniffing, bumping or tooting.

Very few persons inject the drug by mixing it with water, or smoke it by breaking it down into its component parts with ether and fire in a complicated procedure known as freebasin. Fourrier said.

Narcotics agent shovels "snow" seized in an arrest