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Drug Problems Escalate After Hurricane Katrina

By **CHRISTOPHER DREW**

SLIDELL, La. — It was just before dawn when the pickup truck arrived at the two-story house in this middle-class suburb, which was hit hard by Hurricane Katrina. But unlike most of the trucks here now, it was not carrying construction supplies.

Federal agents, who were hiding in the bushes, say the truck was bringing 50 kilograms of cocaine, worth \$5 million, from Houston to the murderous streets of nearby New Orleans. They also say that the shipment, seized on May 18, was at least five times as large as the typical drug delivery before the storm.

The drug trade in New Orleans is flourishing again, after its dealers, who evacuated to the regional drug hub of Houston, forged closer ties to major suppliers from the Mexican and Colombian cartels. They have since brought back drugs to New Orleans in far larger shipments than before, as the seized truck illustrates, essentially creating violent distribution gangs now spread over a much bigger area.

As a result, law enforcement officials in New Orleans and Houston are struggling to keep up with the changes as the region's drug trade merges to a greater extent than ever before, adding to the murder rates in both cities.

As the drug-dealing returns, its effects are proving deadly for New Orleans, where the police say that fights over turf for distributing the drugs are the main reason for a spike in killings that threatens the city's recovery. Even though its population is less than half of what it was before the storm, New Orleans recorded 22 homicides in July, the same number that it averaged each month in the three years before the hurricane.

Several poor neighborhoods in Houston, which has long been the main supply hub for drugs flowing across the southwest border, have been reeling as well. According to the Houston Police Department, Hurricane Katrina evacuees have been the suspects or victims in 44 homicides there, including many tied to gang-related drug dealing. And 14 percent of Houston's felony narcotics arrests in the first six months of this year involved people displaced by the storm.

Sgt. Brian Harris, a Houston police homicide investigator, said that one evacuee, Ivory Harris, whose street name is B Stupid, was a suspect in three killings in Houston before he was arrested in March with a cache of drugs near New Orleans, where he was also wanted on murder charges. Sergeant Harris said several others, including two juveniles, once linked to a New Orleans gang called the Seventh Ward Hardheads, had been tied to 4 homicides and 28 other crimes in Houston.

Some of the crimes involved New Orleans gang members fighting one another over drugs and women during New Orleans music nights at Houston nightclubs, Sergeant Harris said, adding that he and other Houston officers were initially shocked by how many witnesses refused to cooperate.

New Orleans police officials have long complained that fears among witnesses about retaliation have hampered their ability to stop the drug trade. But to the Houston police, persuading witnesses to talk “was like trying to educate foreigners in the ways of the United States,” Sergeant Harris said.

Still, the Houston police have made enough arrests for word to get around that it is much harder to get out of jail there than it is in New Orleans, where murder suspects in the city’s weak court system have often been released after 60 days when no witnesses spoke up.

So some of the drug dealers have returned to New Orleans along with their customers, while others are now commuting between the two cities, law enforcement officials say.

Federal agents and the police in both cities have stepped up cooperation in tracking these movements, and they are pushing for more intelligence about the changes.

One of their biggest priorities is to try to choke off the supply of cocaine and heroin moving from Houston to New Orleans, usually in concealed compartments in vehicles zipping down Interstate 10.

Law enforcement officials say the vehicles — now often pickup trucks that can blend in with the post-storm construction traffic — are typically escorted by cars with heavily armed lookouts. Investigators say they suspect that a Houston man, who has been charged with killing a suburban New Orleans police captain in June, was one such lookout.

The cocaine truck seized here in May, which involved a mix of New Orleans evacuees and Mexican-Americans from Houston, is “a really good example” of the changes, said William J. Renton Jr., the special agent in charge of the New Orleans office of the federal [Drug Enforcement Administration](#).

Before the storm, he said, “Whenever we’d seize drugs destined for the greater New Orleans area, it was mostly 5 and 10 kilograms.” But since then, he added, “even guys who may not have been the biggest dope peddlers in the city went to Houston and met people who were involved in supplying, and new or deeper relationships developed.”

Over all, the volume of drugs headed for New Orleans has probably not declined as sharply as the city’s population, law enforcement authorities say, given the need to replenish stockpiles that were destroyed when the safe houses were ruined in the floods.

“There was probably a lot of dope washed out into Lake Pontchartrain during the flood,” said James D. Craig, the D.E.A.’s special agent in charge in Houston.

And because the New Orleans dealers would still be on the hook for the cost of those drugs, “some of them are in debt” to the Houston suppliers, he said. “And some of them are probably trying to make the money back by saying, ‘O.K., let me sell more dope.’ ”

Mr. Craig said the seizure of the 50 kilograms in Slidell illustrates how displaced New Orleans residents have teamed up with people in Houston to put together bigger deals.

Federal authorities said they believed the shipment originated at the Houston home of Joseph H. Aguirre, 40, a Mexican-American with a record of arrests for marijuana possession.

When the agents raided the house in Slidell, they also seized 3,500 Ecstasy tablets, 5 pounds of high-potency marijuana and \$60,000 in cash. And they arrested six people, including three men who had moved from New Orleans to Texas after the storm and who are believed to have driven the truck from Houston.

Records show that one of those men, and the house's owner, who was also arrested, had both been previously convicted on drug distribution charges. In Houston, Mr. Aguirre pleaded guilty last month to state charges involving cocaine and other drugs found in his apartment. The authorities say his connection to the Slidell shipment remains under investigation.

James Bernazzani, the [F.B.I.](#)'s special agent in charge in New Orleans, said Asian gang members from Canada had also recently begun distributing large quantities of drugs in the eastern part of the city, though the authorities had been beating them back.

But there has been little relief from the drug wars in the poor neighborhoods in central New Orleans, where the bulk of the homicides has occurred. And even if some of the local dealers are turning to new suppliers in Houston, the police say, they have no intention of giving up any of their own turf to newcomers.

James F. Scott, a deputy New Orleans police superintendent, said a lone Hispanic man had recently showed up on a Central City street corner to sell drugs. His body was later found there, with four bullet holes in his back and four in his chest.

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