Addicts' Victims Turn Vigilante

This is the first of a series written by Richard Severo and prepared with the assistance of Barbara Campbell.

Violence and vigilante groups are becoming widely accepted by slum residents as the most effective way of ridding their neighborhoods of narcotics addicts.

Attacks by armed gangs have taken place, many of them apparently unnoticed or ignored by the police, and residents of besieged neighborhoods say they are planning offensives against junkies. They are prompted, they say, by the failure of law-enforcement and other city agencies to reduce or even control the spread of heroin.

"We warn the pushers: In this block you do not push," said the 17-year-old leader of a gang that prowls the Lower East Side. "We tell the dope fiends: Here you do not steal. If they listen to us, fine. They push their poison someplace else. If they do not listen, we get them."

For the poor, as well as for officials who face the problem every day, drug addiction in New York seems to defy solution even as it grows more acute.

The police have not been able to eliminate it or even effectively control it; various therapeutic programs have shown both promise and failure and those in charge often show an inability to cooperate with one another; and hospitals, which have the potential for doing much, have thus far been either unwilling or unable to do anything substantial.

The result is a social crisis of immense cost and complexity that has ravaged communities, disrupted the city, and continues to drain human and financial resources —with no end in sight.

A two-month study of the narcotics problem by The New York Times indicates that in areas infested with addicts, the residents now regard retribution as preferable to promises of protection and plans for therapeutic programs that never seem big enough, prompt enough or workable.

The emerging pattern of violence is evident mostly on the Lower East Side and in Harlem and a few areas in Brooklyn. In other areas, such as the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, the fear of junkies and pushers has led not to counterattack, but to a fearful capitulation of spirit and

Continued on Page 34, Column 1

Targets of Addicts Turning Vigilante

Continued From Page 1, Col. 4

an acceptance of a Wild West kind of lawlessness.

The addict who used to be tolerated as a nuisance or even embraced as a "sick" friend is now hated as a sneak thief and feared as a mugger; the pusher who used to be disdainfully regarded as a ne'er-do-well or perhaps even admired as a poor boy who had made it big, is now despised as a menace to the children who can easily buy narcotics in the schoolyard.

Among the investigation's findings are these:

¶At least one large, organized group of Puerto Ricans and Negroes have beaten up pushers and addicts on the Lower East Side in the area between Second and 14th Streets and along Avenues C and D. One gang member said he was doing it "because the junkies are destroying my people."

Other groups of teen-agers and young people have formed gangs and say they are planning to do the same thing elsewhere on the Lower East Side and in Harlem.

¶More common than the youth gangs are self-defense groups among adults. There are more than 90 tenant patrols operating in the city's public-housing projects, and the city is paying patrol leaders $2.50 an hour.

¶Tenement-dwellers on the Lower East Side have armed themselves not only with clubs and knives, but also with rifles and handguns, to protect themselves and their buildings. One group on East Seventh Street has even purchased walkie-talkies for patrol use.

¶Although the police deny any knowledge of the armed self-defense groups, members say that the police have, in fact, encouraged them. One patrolman is credited with teaching tenants how to make clubs of old table legs.

¶Mail theft by heroin users is so frequent that the Post Office is spending $360,000 a year on overtime in the Bronx and in Brooklyn for special protection.

Not a New Approach

Vigilante groups are not new, either here or elsewhere, nor is violence new as a means of dealing with community problems. But the growing preference for applying these tactics to drug pushers and users is viewed by some observers as a portent of widespread acceptance of an oversimplified, punitive solution to a vastly complicated issue.

Animosity toward the addict has reached such a point in some neighborhoods that politicians who have supported progressive approaches to addiction control are under increasing pressure to support any action that will take junkies out of circulation.

An aide to one liberal state legislator, who asked that his name not be used, said: "Don't kid yourself that this 'sweep the streets' business is limited to conservatives. It's probably even more intense in the poorer neighborhoods. The people who are demanding it are the very people who used to provide the impetus for liberal legislation."

The new and intense loathing of the addict is coupled, in the slums, with an ambivalence toward the police. People say they want more police protection, but also say they have lost faith in the police.

Poor families have lost their television sets to addict thieves. The current militancy against addict and pusher is heightened by the fact that families are now losing much more than television sets. They are losing young sons and daughters. For the facts clearly indicate that addicts are getting younger with every passing year.

Dr. Michael Baden, associate medical examiner of New York, says that in 1967 the median age of addicts who died after using heroin was 28. Now the median age is 22.

In 1966, there were 33 teen-agers who died in New York after taking heroin. Last year the number rose to 72. But in three months—June, July and August—71 died this year. Sixty per cent of them were black and 30 per cent were Puerto Rican. Addicts aged 14 are not uncommon these days and slum residents report that 8-year-olds are experimenting with heroin bought in the schoolyard.

Neighborhoods Vary

The state of hostilities that now exists in the most beleaguered neighborhoods is one that nobody wants to talk about. The tenement-dweller is angry but he does not like to speak of retribution; the role of gun-toter is not one he is easy with. He does not like making war on people he knows.

Nor does every neighborhood react to the problem in the same way. Chinatown, for example, has a very small, though growing, problem among its teen-agers, but no defense measures were observed there. A resident of the neighborhood said most parents refused to admit that any problem existed, since the use of heroin carried with it a terrible stigma among the Chinese.

People of Italian extraction on the Lower East Side also have a small but developing addiction problem among their young. But no organized defense groups are evident in Little Italy, either, and junkies are almost never seen there. Addicts with Italian names, however, appear in Puerto Rican blocks on the Lower East Side.

"The Italians will not tolerate dope addicts in their midst," said a resident of Little Italy. Asked how the Italians managed to prevent addicts from swarming over them, he replied: "We do it like we have always done it. If we have a problem in the neighborhood, we settle it in the neighborhood."

The same ethnic groups reacted differently in different places. The Puerto Ricans of the Lower East Side were "turf"-oriented, well aware that they had a problem and predisposed to settle it themselves—an attitude similar to that of the Italians to the west of them, although not so well established.

But in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx the Puerto Ricans seemed more submissive, less sure of themselves, distrustful of both police and pusher.

In Harlem at least three groups advocate dealing very firmly with the addict. Some members of all groups admitted they were armed when they went into the street to search for addicts. Others said they dealt with addicts and pushers only with their fists. The intention among members of all three groups was simply to drive addicts and pushers from their neighborhoods—there was little talk of rehabilitation or hospitalization.

Perhaps the most outspoken proponent of a street offensive against addicts and pushers is the Rev. Oberia Dempsey of the Upper Park Avenue Baptist Church, who believes there are 250,000 heroin users in Harlem alone. He carries a revolver with him because he fears that pushers may attack him for his firm stand on narcotics.

When Mr. Dempsey speaks of the problem his language may seem more reminiscent of what one can hear from the most conservative law-and-order advocate, rather than a Harlem preacher. But the similarities are superficial. Mr. Dempsey talks out of desperation, not ideology.

"We don't advocate taking the law in our own hands," he said, "but the emphasis of the law is placed on protecting the rights of the criminal, not the decent citizen. I think every addict who is on the streets must be removed from Harlem. The government should set up health camps outside the city, in old Army bases upstate. A lot of so-called bleeding-heart liberals could go up and act as counselors."

Another group advocating a militant approach is the Harlem Youth Federation. Its president, Hannibal Ahmed, is currently under indictment, charged with conspiring with five other Harlem Negroes to kill a white policeman every week. They have all pleaded not guilty.

Mr. Ahmed and his colleagues are particularly concerned about the increased use of heroin among children and what they call the inability of the police to do anything about it.

Federation members talk to children whenever and wherever they can, alerting them to the perils of narcotics use. Frequently, when they meet with groups of children, they sing this song, to the tune of "Old MacDonald":

Eee-i, Eee-o, drugs must go,
Dah-dah-dah-dah-dah.
The pushers must be off-off-off,
Dah-dah-dah-dah-dah.
The people must work both day and night,
Time for us to put up a fight.
Eee-i Eee-o drugs must go
Dah-dah-dah-dah-dah.

Mr. Ahmed says that "some of the older brothers are giving dope to 10-year-olds and there is no place for them to get help."

The Harlem Youth Federation has a mattress in its 125th Street headquarters and its members stand ready 24 hours a day to help any addict who wants to detoxify himself.

This summer 28 of the federation's 60 members asked Harlem residents between 110th and 155th Streets how they thought addicts should be handled in the community.

Violence Advocated

The consensus was summed up by such comments as "Knock their heads in," "They are killing our people" and "They should be killed."

The head of the third group advocating drastic measures against addicts is John Shabazz of the Black Citizens Patrol, an organization claiming 155 members. It was formed about a year and a half ago.

Mr. Shabazz, a former associate of Malcolm X, said he wanted no money and no help from the police—only that, starting this fall, his followers would try to "discourage" those who would sell narcotics in Harlem public schools.

"We have the names and photographs of pushers," he said, "and we will have people inside the schools to turn over the names to the proper authorities. If they don't deal with the problem, we will have to deal with it our own way."

A former Harlem heroin dealer who estimates he made $4,000 to $5,000 a week on sales of about four pounds, was asked how he justified what he did. The dealer, whose name cannot be used, replied:

"I never gave it a thought whether it was right or wrong. It was just a way of making money. I was never in any trouble. You can get into trouble by selling some bad dope. I knew I was getting good dope from the people I was dealing with."

He insisted however, that "I never sold to kids." The dealer was disconcerted recently to learn that his teenage son used heroin.

Mr. Shabazz was invited to lecture to a group of teen-agers in a church basement in Central Harlem. The spirit of the meeting was almost evangelical.

Mr. Shabazz: Only a first-class jackass would stick a needle in his arm and shoot up. What kind of fool would do that?

'You Know What To Do'

Teen-agers (in unison): Somebody who don't have nothing else to do.

Mr. S: What kind of dope is here in Harlem?

Teen-agers (shouting): Cocaine! Heroin! Weight pills! Reefers!

Mr. S: What's the youngest age of an addict that you've heard of? Teen-agers: Eight!

Mr. S: Where do drugs come from in the schools? Teen-agers: Pushers!

Mr. S: Do the pushers go to school? Teen-agers: Yes!

Mr. S: And what school has more drug pushers than any other?

Here the teen-agers were not unanimous, filling the room with shouts of the high schools they knew—George Washington, Louis D. Brandeis, Charles Evans Hughes, Benjamin Franklin.

Mr. Shabazz then told the teen-agers that if anyone came up to them and offered them drugs, "you know what to do—knock the hell out of them." The youngsters applauded.

The Harlem groups are for the most part only threatening violence, but one gang on the Lower East Side has already skirmished with pushers. Gang members say that one of their number was murdered last year; retaliation, they say, from the pushers.

The gang, which has a name but does not want it published, claims more than 100 members. It is armed and is led by a 17-year-old youth who will be called Ramon here.

"We have agents who follow junkies and pushers around," Ramon said. "We know every one of them. We know when pushers get the stuff and we know when particular junkies need a fix. We know exactly what is going on in this neighborhood, which is more than I can say for the police."

But perhaps the most disquieting experience is talking to ordinary people—black and white, poor and not so poor—who are not members of gangs, not especially young, are not violent and do not want to be. People whose only contact with violence has been on television now talk calmly and seriously of violence as necessary for their survival.

A 62-year-old man who had worked as a guard said he never walked in the hall of his lower East Side building unless he carried a loaded revolver in his hand. A professional trumpet player in the same neighborhood who was mugged twice took karate lessons and did battle with a junkie who tried to mug him in the hallway outside his apartment.

A pregnant housewife who lives nearby says she now thinks of simple household implements as potential weapons.

Several other women said they were purchasing small spray cans of chemical irritants and carrying them in their purses; still other women were carrying knives and cans of pepper.

A young woman in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn says she will kill the next addict who tries to steal anything from her apartment; a neighbor said he recently waited behind a door for two hours with a baseball bat for the addict who had unsuccessfully tried to get into his apartment earlier.

"The good Lord took a liking to him," the man said, "because he didn't come back and that's what saved me from killing him."

The superintendent of a tenement near the corner of East Seventh Street and Avenue D carries a gun, as does his wife. "I tell the junkies," he says, "You fool around with me and I'm gonna fool around with you."

Over and over the visitor finds evidence that some neighborhoods have become armed camps, filled with people who believe that the only way to survive in New York in the year 1969 is with guns, knives and chemicals.

Charles Parker, a Bronx resident who was the prime mover recently in forming a coalition of youngsters and adults who patrol the streets and report wrongdoing to the police, says that he and many of his neighbors have bought big television-radio-phonograph consoles because "you can't carry one of those babies down a fire escape."

The trumpet player who took karate lessons is Marc Levin, 27, who lived at 278 East Seventh Street for five years, but has since moved to a relatively quiet part of Greenwich Village.

Although Mr. Levin, a quiet man of average height and weight, is more interested in practicing his horn, he practiced karate four to five hours a day after he was mugged a second time.

Offers Gift Record

He recalls that the second time, he gave the junkie $2.35 (all he had) and offered to give him an autographed copy of a jazz record he had cut called "The Dragon Suite." But some people approached and the junkie ran off—without the record.

The junkie had brandished a knife, and that frightened Mr. Levin, who then began to study self-defense techniques.

The third attack—the one that prompted his flight from the Lower East Side—took place last April 24 shortly before 7 P.M. Mr. Levin was wearing a suit (which made him stand out in his neighborhood) and was walking on Seventh Street near home.

"This tall, skinny kid, I guess he was about 6-foot-2, he had a butcher's knife. I remember looking at the knife pretty closely because it looked like the kind my old man cuts onions with (His father owns a kosher delicatessen in Bayonne).

"He followed me into the building and up on the third floor, when I was getting the key out for my apartment (3-B) he rushed me. I threw my groceries at him, gave a karate yell and tried to kick him in the groin. But my foot didn't connect.

"I yelled, 'hey, rube!' a signal I had prearranged with my neighbor, Tony Rivera in 3A. Tony had a lead pipe and was prepared to come out into the hall if there was ever any trouble. I yelled 'Help! help! help!' The guy was about 20 feet from me. He was deciding if he should take me or run. But people started coming and he ran down the stairs. Then I noticed my wrist was slashed."

In May, Mr. Levin left 278 East Seventh Street.

Tenants Form Patrol

Afterwards, the tenants in Nos. 272, 274 and 278 formed a patrol. It was composed of 20 men, all volunteers, who took turns guarding the building. Every stranger was stopped, then escorted upstairs to his destination. The men were armed with lead pipes and handguns, and one man even used a sword.

Although Deputy Inspector Joseph Fink, commander of the East Fifth Street Police station, said he did not know of the existence of any such group, a member said that a patrolman got out of his squad car one night and "taught us how to make clubs out of table legs—after all, we were doing his work"

The tenants' patrol has become inactive in recent weeks because members grew tired of giving it so much time. Also, more police now patrol in the area.

Not all tenants' patrols are so informal. Ninety-two of the New York City Housing Authority's 157 projects have "citizens' patrols" that are subsidized by the authority this year at the rate of $50,000 to $75,000.

The money goes to recruiters and patrol supervisors, who are paid $2.50 an hour for a maximum 20-hour week and for coffee and pastries for patrol members, who spend long evening hours guarding the lobbies. The 4,500 project residents who are just members are not paid, they volunteer.

A visitor to the Rutgers House Project on the Lower East Side found that most patrol members were elderly Jews, joined by a sprinkling of Puerto Ricans and Negroes. So far, patrol members have made no arrests.

Jerry Schulman, who until recently was director of the Rutgers Community Center, said that Chinese residents of the project refuse to join the patrol and stick together so closely that they seldom called the police if anything went wrong.

A Chinese resident of the area offered another explanation. The police back home are corrupt he said, and many new arrivals think that the police here must be just as bad.

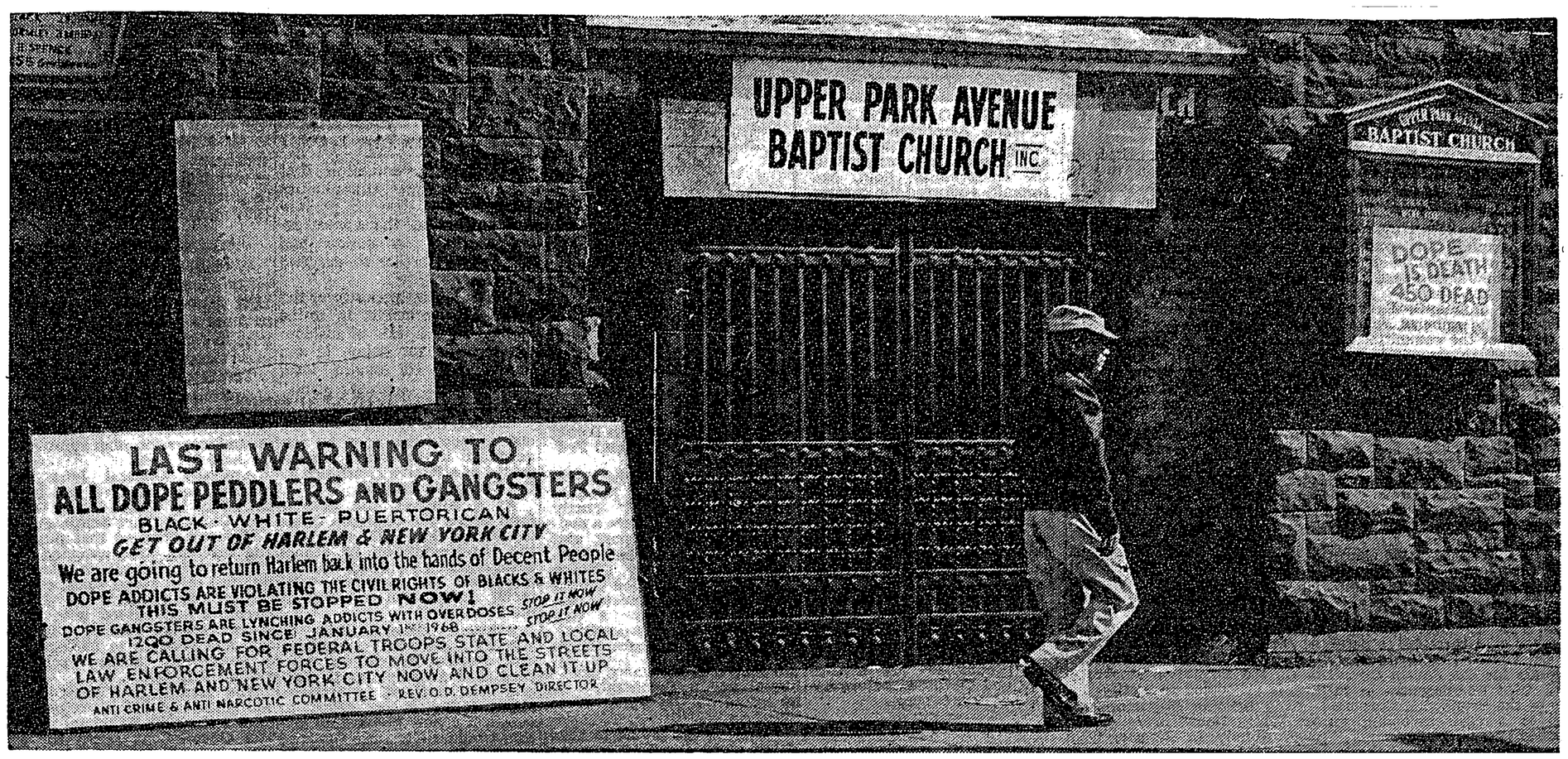
Mr. Schulman says that Italians and Jews will not hesitate to call the police, but that Italians will not join the patrol. Mr. Schulman attributes this to their "individualistic make-up."

But Mrs. Louis Cammarota, who briefly joined the Rutgers tenant patrol and then quit, said she did so because she thought someone qualified ought to do the patroling, "not a bunch of old people."

Irving Levy, a 68-year-old widower who used to be a house painter before he retired, is one of the most active members of the project's citizens' patrol. Asked why he put in the hours and risked injury, he said "I have nothing else to do. And besides, I used to be in the Marine Corps Reserve, so you can see I'm qualified for this."

But Mr. Levy feels he lacks real authority and complained that recently a couple of teen-agers ripped off the armband he wears. "If I had a uniform," he said, "or a special officer's badge and maybe a club and a pair of handcuffs, then I could do a job."

Tomorrow: A visit to Hunts Point.



Photographs for The New York Times by BARTON SILVERMAN

On East 125th Street, strong warnings are posted in front of the Rev. Oberia Dempsey's church. He is a stanch advocate of combating narcotics traffic through a street offensive.

Addicts Steal $2.6-Billion

Despite the complexity of the narcotics problem, the arithmetic of it is simple. There are an estimated 100,000 heroin users in New York City. The average habit costs slightly over $30 a day, which most addicts cannot support through ordinary jobs. Therefore, they swindle people out of money if they can and steal if they cannot.

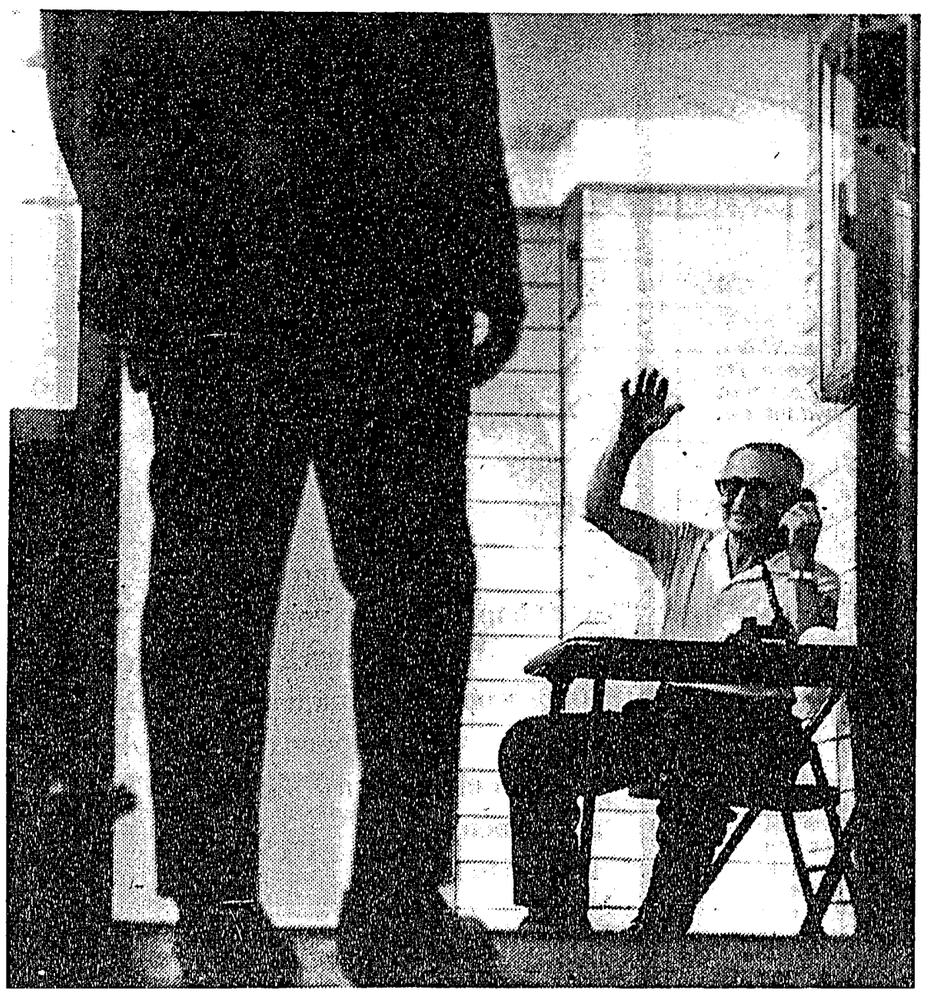
Dr. Michael Baden, associate medical examiner, estimates that the city's heroin users are spending at least $850-million a year with pushers on the street, and may be stealing as much as $2.6-billion a year in property.

The reason for the discrepancy between what is stolen and what is spent is that addicts frequently receive less than two-thirds of the real value of stolen goods.

Most of the stealing goes unreported, Dr. Baden said, because so many of the victims are either relatives and friends who are reluctant to lodge a complaint, or others who feel there is little the police can do.

Rightly or wrongly, many people are blaming addicts for most of the burglaries, robberies and muggings in the city. Although no comprehensive study has been done, Governor Rockefeller has estimated that perhaps half the reported crime in New York is the work of addicts.

George F. McGrath, Commissioner of Corrections, reports that of a total prison population of 13,500, 40 per cent of the men are considered to be addicts, and at least 60 per cent of the women.



Irving Levy, 68, an active member of the citizens' patrol at the Rutgers housing project on the Lower East Side, stopping a visitor in a building doorway to check identification.