

Ucok wears a denim jacket all day, despite the intense Jakarta heat. He doesn't want people to see the scars on his arms. A quietly spoken 29 year-old, Ucok is an outreach worker for drug addicts in Jakarta's most densely populated slum, Tambora. He knows the place well. Until six years ago he was a heroin addict too.

Tambora has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in Southeast Asia, and the rate of infection is growing. In the last ten years the number of infections has increased 2000 percent. Unlike Papua and most other parts of the world, where HIV is most commonly spread through sexual activity, 72 percent of infections in Tambora are a result of intravenous drug use (IDU).

Ucok works for an HIV/AIDS advocacy and harm reduction organisation called Kios. Its work is simple, and progressive. Each day 12 outreach workers go to around 250 street corners, shops, tyre service centres and other agreed upon places to give little cardboard boxes to drug users. The boxes contain 12 clean syringes, alcohol swabs and condoms. The idea is to educate drug users against engaging in high-risk behaviour, and to offer a peer network to empower people to beat addiction.

I spent several afternoons with Ucok and his colleagues travelling through Tambora on motorcycles. The suburb is a maze of houses stacked precariously over narrow laneways. In some places a thousand people live in a single hectare, according to the Indonesian National Board of Statistics. Homes are small and dark, and usually only used for cooking and sleeping. For most people home extends out onto the alleyways below, where people sit on benches and doorsteps, working, eating and chatting.



*Tambora has the highest population density in Southeast Asia. All space is utilised, including the busy train line that runs through the slum. Despite the poverty, dignity is more evident than misery.*

We stop and sit outside a café, waiting for addicts to bring their used syringes and collect new packages. About 6900 used syringes are collected each month. Slowly, a few young men approach. They speak briefly with the outreach workers before tucking the boxes into their trousers with ostensible nervousness, covering the bulge with their shirts, and quickly vanishing back into the crowd.

Stigma is attached to drug use within the community, but that's not why they hide the boxes. "Another addict was coming too," says Ucok, "but he was stopped by the police on his way here and arrested for having a syringe."

Kios' work is legal and protected by law, but narcotics are an easy source of revenue for local police. As such, the outreach workers must play a constant game of leapfrog with them in order to do their job. Addicts will not come for the packages if the police are nearby.

"Junkies know they break the law by taking drugs, so even when they aren't actually carrying heroin, the police can still arrest and blackmail them," says Ebbe, Kios' community advocacy officer. Kios currently has 1144 IDU clients in Tambora. Of these, almost 95 percent live with their parents, many of whom don't know their children are drug addicts. Blackmail is easy.

'Al Pacino', as he calls himself, is a 37 year-old addict and middleman. He funds his drug addiction by buying drugs for others. "I know the drug dealers pay off the police so they can sell here," he says. "They tell the police who the junkies are, too. The police have a monthly quota of arrests to make. It's all part of the deal."

The police are often indiscriminate in their avarice. Jon, an outreach worker, describes how twice he was forced to strip naked in a crowded street while the police searched his possessions and body orifices for drugs. He was working both times, so he had several boxes of clean syringes. "I knew they had no right," he says, "but you don't ask questions when there's a gun pointed at you."

The next day we visit Bobby, Rama and Oki in a small bedroom, where an hour earlier they injected heroin together. The room is tidy, with several framed posters hanging on the white walls. Outside a row of flowering pot plants hang from the tiny, second-floor balcony. Only their glazed eyes seem out of place.

Bobby, 23, is the oldest of the three. He has been using drugs since he was 13 and describes himself as "one of the lucky ones," though he is HIV positive. "Not many junkies live more than ten years," he says. All his closest high-school friends have died of overdoses. They used to shoot up in the playground. "Drugs have never been hard to find," he says.



*Boby shows me how he injects heroin three or four times a day*

Sadly, premature death is one of the few things to limit the spread of HIV infection in Tambora. It isn't a factor the outreach workers care to rely on, though. "Once you're infected it doesn't matter how long you live with the virus, if you share needles and have unprotected sex, you've already spread it," says Dr Irwanto of Atma Jaya University, an expert in HIV prevention.

Boby says he shares needles with friends when he's desperate and doesn't have clean ones, even though he knows how easily HIV is spread. "When you're suffering from withdrawal you only care about the next fix. Nothing else matters. Not God, not family, not HIV," he says. The closest place to buy syringes and needles is several kilometres away.

Next to Boby sits Oki, who sleeps intermittently while Bobi talks. She is 16 and has only been using heroin for seven months, since her father was arrested and sentenced to 18 months in gaol. That morning she sold her mobile phone so she could buy heroin. I ask how she plans to buy heroin tomorrow and she points to the rings on her right hand. And the day after? "I don't know yet," she says shyly. "Maybe we'll get lucky."

After leaving the home Ucok confirms my suspicion. If Oki runs out of things to sell the day after tomorrow she will sell herself, again. She and Boby inject heroin three to four times a day, which costs them about 150 000 rupiah each. Rama, 17, the quietest of the three, was arrested the previous week for robbing a woman at knifepoint. It's hard to imagine, looking at his slim figure slouched on the rug. "When you need a hit, you don't think. You go crazy," he says. The woman, who also lives in Tambora, decided not to press charges.

Boby has been arrested two times for carrying syringes. Each time he has “donated” one million rupiah for each syringe he was carrying: one the first time, and two the second. “I wasn’t carrying any heroin,” he says, “but that didn’t matter.”

As a girl, Oki is an exception. There are twenty male addicts in Tambora for every female addict. It is generally easier for women to find work, usually as a maid in a wealthy household, or to occupy themselves with the traditional tasks expected of them like raising a family and keeping a home. In contrast, unemployment and underemployment are universal amongst young men. Despite Indonesia’s infamously hard stance on drugs, heroin is a readily available solution to boredom and depression.



*Off the rails, on the rails*

The high incidence of drug abuse in Tambora is directly related to poverty and unemployment. Ebbe shows me a timeline of HIV infection in Indonesia. The incidence begins to spike dramatically in 1998 when the Asian economic crisis caused much turmoil, unrest and suffering. Infection has been rising steadily ever since, in tandem with drug abuse.

The other significant event of 1998, of course, was the end of the Suharto regime. Prior to 1998 Indonesia was primarily a transit country for drugs, though some did spill over into the local market. However, Dr Irwanto says Suharto did little to stem drug abuse. “Although there was ostensibly a hard stance on drugs, just as there is now, many of the most powerful people in Indonesia were heavily connected to drug trafficking,” He says.

It’s a lucrative market. A 2004 United Nations report estimates that at least one per cent of Indonesians are drug users, and possibly many more. That is, over two million people. In 2002, police seized 20.1 kilograms of heroin, 23.1kg of cocaine, and over

60 000kg of cannabis, as well as significant amounts of crystal methamphetamines and ecstasy. The street value of such seizures, says Dr Irwanto, vastly outweighs government expenditure against drugs.

“The government appears very serious in addressing the drug problem,” says Dr Irwanto, “but if you look at the budget allocations, the figures speak less seriously.” The United Nations report on drug-related HIV in Indonesia suggests more emphasis should be given to health and education. “Current government policy is largely based on criminalisation,” says Dr Irwanto. “The budget for policing drugs is more than five times the budget for HIV health or education programs.” Kios is funded through international aid.

Of the nearly 1200 addicts in Tambora attended by Kios, 63 percent are HIV positive. Seventy six percent are sexually active and don't use condoms. ‘Al Pacino’ is married with an eight year-old son, who has often seen him inject heroin. His wife is from rural Java and knows nothing about HIV/AIDS. “She is a good woman,” he says. “She wants me to stop using drugs.”

“Sometimes it's hard to explain to the community that we are only doing harm reduction to help stem the spread of HIV,” says Ebbe. “People are dreaming of stopping drug trafficking.”

But so long as the police are facilitating local drug trade and unemployment remains the norm, drug abuse in Tambora won't stop. “If we are going to control and stabilise the spread of HIV in Tambora we will have to reach at least 80 percent of the drug users,” says Ebbe. To do that, they'll have to stay a leap ahead of the police.