

Cheap cocaine floods Argentina and Brazil

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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FULL TEXT

Bilma Acuna has two drug-addicted sons and roams the streets of this slum with a purpose: to save others from the same fate.

She and the group of mothers she helps organize have become the only bulwark, it seems, against the irrepressible spread of paco, a highly addictive form of crack cocaine that has destroyed thousands of lives in Argentina and caused a cycle of drug-induced street violence never before seen in this country.

The scourge underscores a dramatic shift in both Argentina and its larger neighbor, Brazil, which in just a few years have become sizable cocaine consumers. Brazil now ranks as the second-largest total consumer of cocaine in the world after the United States, according to the State Department.

The surge in drug use has been fueled by porous borders, economic hardship and, more recently, the rolling back of restrictions on coca growing since President Evo Morales took office in 2006 in neighboring Bolivia. The result has been the democratization of cocaine in this part of South America, which has become the dumping grounds for cheaper, lower-quality cocaine.

In the five years since residents first began noticing the crude yellowish powder being smoked on the streets of Ciudad Oculta, home to 15,000 people, paco has become the dominant drug that dealers are peddling.

Just weeks after first trying the drug, Acuna's son Pablo Eche began selling everything he owned to feed his addiction. He committed violent robberies. In a drug-fueled rage he destroyed his house and then sold the land that was left, leaving him freezing and alone on the streets until his grandmother took him in.

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streets that were using paco, and he always said he wouldn't get caught up in that. But he did."

The challenges to stopping the flow are immense. Fewer than 200 federal police officers patrol Brazil's 3,400-kilometer, or 2,100-mile, border with Bolivia, though the Brazilian government says reinforcements are on the way. Only 10 percent of Argentina's airspace is covered by radar, leaving traffickers free rein.

Both countries have seen a huge surge in cocaine seizures in the past two years and a number of spectacular busts. The influx of raw cocaine paste used to make crack, from both Bolivia and Peru, has been particularly acute. In Brazil, such seizures by the federal police nearly quadrupled from 2006 to 2007, from 322 kilograms to 1,240 kilograms, or 2,700 pounds, according to the federal police.

In Argentina, the deep financial crisis of late 2001 turned places like Ciudad Oculta into what are known here as villas miserias, or towns of misery, and easily exploitable markets of impoverished people looking for escape.

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The surge in lower-quality cocaine hitting the streets has resulted from a crackdown by both governments on the chemicals needed to transform cocaine paste, or pasta base, as it is called, into powder form.

Tougher customs rules to track the flow of the chemicals, which are manufactured in large quantities in both places, has limited access for Bolivian traffickers seeking to refine the base cocaine into higher-value powder, said General Roberto Uchoa, Brazil's national drug secretary.

As the quality of Bolivian product has fallen off, the European market, in particular, has rejected the lower-quality drug, the general said. So more of it has gone to Argentina and Brazil.

In S-o Paulo, the police say the cocaine on the streets is less than 30 percent pure.

"Every year they are producing more, and that is driving down prices," Magno said.

Traffickers are cutting the cocaine powder with everything from boric acid to lidocaine to baking powder, leading to severe health effects like infections and blood clots, health officials said.

"It is the garbage cocaine that is coming here," Acuna said. "The kids here are smoking garbage."

Acuna, a soft-spoken Paraguayan native, is battling paco's spread to save the barrio, but also to save her family. Tragedy first struck in August 2001 when two drug dealers shot and killed her 16-year-old son, David, one week after he allegedly witnessed a murder. The dealers are now serving prison time for his killing.

A few years later Eche, her eldest son, and her younger son, Leandro, 20, both became addicted to paco. It was then that she helped form a Mothers of Paco support group.

With fewer than three-dozen members in Ciudad Oculta, the mothers have few ways to counter the armed dealers that hold sway over the neighborhood. Instead, they find safety in numbers.

On one recent afternoon, Acuna led a walk through Oculita with some eight women in tow. As she walked along the mostly unpaved streets, Bolivian and Paraguayan music blaring from open windows, she pointed out kiosks and red brick homes where dealers are known to sell. A young boy of less than 16 years strode by at one point, a pistol stuffed in the front of his shorts.

In a makeshift plaza sits a tiny police station the size of a one-car garage. A single police car was parked outside.

"The police haven't entered here much since 2001," Acuna explained. Nor has the government announced any major initiatives to tackle the problem.

Instead, led by the mothers, residents are largely taking matters into their own hands. Acuna fields dozens of calls a week from mothers seeking help with their children's addictions. She refers some to government-run psychiatric clinics, and urges others, some of whom are recovering from addiction themselves, to join the group.

Acuna operates a small diner with a bare concrete floor where many of the mothers hold their meetings. At one meeting, on Jan. 28, Liliana Barrionuevo blurted out that not enough was being done to crack down on the dealers. Some mothers cast their eyes around nervously, fearful of reprisals.

"Before, there were codes," another mother, Andrea Cordero, chimed in angrily. "The dealers would never sell to young kids, and the users would never use in public. Now there are no codes. We need to stand up and stick it to two or three dealers."

The descent of Acuna's son Pablo Eche parallels that of his neighborhood. His addiction began five years ago when he was 21. His girlfriend at the time, six months pregnant with their son, left him and moved to Italy. Argentina's economic crisis was still ravaging the country, and Ciudad Oculita was gripped by hopelessness.

Every day seemed to be worse. "The lack of money isn't the nightmare," Eche said of the economic crisis. "It's the pressure that it causes in a person, the desperation and the depression."

He said he "was looking for a way to not feel anything, to not feel sadness, to find a way not to cry."

For months he had passed the kiosk on a corner near his house where he knew dealers were selling a new drug, one, it was whispered, that could cheaply fill that hollow place inside.

"I always passed it but never bought anything," he said. Then one day he did.

From the first 15 minutes, paco seized his soul. Soon, he could no longer hold down a job, even at his mother's diner. And he could never have enough of the drug. At one point he went on a three-day paco bender without a wink of sleep, he said.

Three months after smoking his first pipe, he sold anything he could to get cash for paco. Then finally one day, in a drug-induced hysteria, he destroyed the one-bedroom house his mother had given him, tearing down the roof, the walls, the flooring. Eight months into his addiction, he sold what was left for about \$315, one-quarter what his mother had paid.

His relationship with his mother was in shambles. He had stolen from her, and stolen from other family members as well.

"I had turned into a nobody to her," he said. "I caused her a lot of pain."

Homeless, starving and suffering from severe drug-induced chills, he was finally taken in by his grandmother. His mother later came around.

These days, his eyes are clear, his voice steady. Interned at a drug-dependency clinic some 40 minutes from Ciudad Oculta - his fourth rehabilitation stint - he said he had been clean of drugs since October.

Now 25, he is again writing poetry, something he had not done since before he discovered paco.

"The future is uncertain," he said. "But I am getting back my dreams."

But he worries about his brother Leandro, who is still prone to all-night paco benders - "I hope he finds a way to stop" - and mourns for Ciudad Oculta.

"Right now I can see all the little kids lining up to buy," he said, closing his eyes. "Paco is a plague. Somehow we need to protect them from this."

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