

One mother's personal fight against a destructive drug

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Paco is a byproduct from the production of cocaine

On average users start on the drug at 14 years old

FULL TEXT

"My son was the last youngster these people murdered," Bilma Acuña says as she calmly recalls August 15, 2001. Acuña speaks from a modest public kitchen her nonprofit runs in Ciudad Oculta, or Hidden City, a slum in southern Buenos Aires.

The kitchen is officially called En Haccore -- a name derived from the spring where Samson drank in the Bible -- but she and her colleagues are commonly known as the "Mothers against 'paco'," a group of mothers fighting against all odds to stop the use of a destructive drug.

Acuña's story is personal. She says paco led to her son's death.

"People were very scared to report [crimes] to the police. After drug dealers murdered someone's son, they chose not to tell, fearing policemen collaborated with the criminals," Acuña remembers. In a place where crime ruled, David Echegaray, Acuña's son, was at the wrong place at the wrong time. He saw dealers execute a woman after she blew the whistle on them, according to Acuña.

Echegaray, then 16, knew too much. Five days later, gang members killed him.

"When my son was murdered," Acuña says, "I decided he wouldn't be one more, I was going to bring these people to justice."

This mother of four went public. Local media told her story and the judiciary investigated.

"I was threatened. They told me my other children would be killed if I didn't withdraw the criminal complaint," she says.

But she didn't back down. Her work since has helped the Argentinian government catch dealers of paco -- also known as pasta base, a byproduct from the production of cocaine -- as well as slowing down the sale and production of the drug.

Acuña recalls that, despite intimidation, she persisted with her complaint against gangs and, she now believes, justice was served in her son's case. Three Ciudad Oculta criminals were convicted of her son's murder and this rough neighborhood isn't under the rule of gangs anymore, she says.

Nevertheless, her fight is far from over. Acuña refuses to leave the neighborhood she grew up in after arriving from neighboring Paraguay at age 4.

It is in that neighborhood that she loves so much that Acuña and the other mothers use their kitchen to serve anyone in need, especially drug addicts with nowhere else to go. Over a meal, they try to talk the addicts out of taking the drug, and through education they try to rehabilitate them.

"Paco is the most basic part of cocaine, mixed with sulfuric acid, kerosene and other very, very toxic substances," says Eduardo Kalina, a psychiatrist who specializes in addiction. Once in the body, the chemical takes over. The substance is cheap and widely available in Ciudad Oculta and almost every slum in Argentina and other parts of South America.

"While drug use was commonplace here, paco hit us hard because in a very short time we saw youth deteriorate." says Acuña. According to a report by the Catholic University of Argentina, addicts begin using paco on average at age 14.

It was no coincidence that paco arrived and grew in Ciudad Oculta as the United States and Colombia curbed cocaine smuggling.

Traffickers found new routes to export coca from farming areas in Colombia, Peru and Bolivia through Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay. These countries saw labs setting up to produce cocaine, according to a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, or UNODC. Cocaine fetched premium prices, while its production leftovers wreaked havoc among young slum dwellers.

"The drug is very addictive. It asks of you, and asks of you, and asks of you, and when you realize, you can have 500 [Argentine] pesos and in less than an hour you've spent it all," Luis, a paco addict, explains to CNN.

Five hundred Argentine pesos, or \$30, buys up to 20 doses of paco. Each hit delivers a few minutes of a pleasurable euphoric effect, leaving addicts wanting more, according to a report by the Organization of American States. A separate report by the UNODC shows that this euphoria can come with side effects such as seizures or death from cardiac arrest.

Luis, 33, regularly comes to En Haccore for a meal. Like other addicts here, he turns to petty crime to make quick money and spends it all on paco.

The kitchen has turned into a haven for paco addicts like Luis after gangs were chased off. While Acuña hasn't had much luck with Luis, she isn't giving up.

At the kitchen, she makes sure addicts are well fed. Afterward she talks to them, hoping to steer them away from paco.

"Some people say many addicts choose to consume. I don't think so. It's a sickness. If you look at it like this you can better help the kid," Acuña says. For her, having seen few real results with turning addicts away from the drug has made her change her strategy.

"We can't eradicate the sale, so we work on prevention with the youth, because if there is sale, there is demand." After she helped reintroduce the police into the slum, local dealers surprised her with a message.

"They told me through contacts, 'If Bilma doesn't want us to sell [paco] here, she should find a job for us,'" she says, grinning.

After eating, Luis leaves, looking for his next hit of paco.

Today, at least, Acuña once again lost the fight to this powerful drug.

Credit: Diego Laje, CNN

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