

# Drug Abuse in Costa Rica: A Review of Several Studies

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*This article provides a review of drug use surveys conducted by Costa Rica's Institute on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence during the years 1983-1987. These studies dealt with a wide range of subjects—residents of marginal neighborhoods, juvenile male and adult female detainees, and high school students—as well as with the general population. Overall, the studies indicated that the most commonly used illicit drug was marijuana, that the bulk of the drug users (excluding alcohol and tobacco users) were young males, that relevant levels of cocaine use were starting to occur, and that the country's general drug abuse picture poses a problem in need of immediate attention.*

Various drug abuse studies performed in Costa Rica since 1983 indicate that significant levels of drug abuse have been occurring within a diverse array of sample populations. This situation demands immediate attention. A chronological summary of the results of studies performed by Costa Rica's Institute on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (IAFA)<sup>2</sup> from 1983 through 1987 is provided herewith.

## STUDY IN A DEPRESSED AREA

A survey reported in a document entitled "Alcohol and Drugs in the Marginal Area of San José" ("Alcohol y drogas en el area marginal de San José") was carried out in 1983 (1). For the purpose of this study, marginal areas were consid-

ered to be those characterized by dwellings in an advanced state of deterioration. The sample consisted of 469 individuals 15 years of age and older.

The study involved a two-stage interview process. In the first stage the subjects responded to a questionnaire asking for vital statistics and information on the use of alcohol, and also received a medical examination. The second stage, carried out a month later, consisted of both a semistructured interview on drug use and open interviews with some volunteers from the sample group. (The latter interviews employed "open" questions such as "tell me about drugs you use" that gave ample freedom to the people interviewed.)

The results indicate that 14% of the study population had problems with alcoholism, 15% said they had smoked marijuana at one time or another in their lives, and 8% said they used marijuana regularly. The average age of these regular marijuana users was 27. Both occasional marijuana users (who had employed that drug four to 15 times in their lives) and habitual users (who consumed

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it one to three times a week) tended to use it in combination with alcohol, while heavy marijuana users (who consumed it 15 times a month or more) tended to use it in combination with other drugs.

It was found that only 2% of the study sample inhaled industrial solvents on a regular basis. One apparent reason why this percentage was so low is that the age of the study subjects was 15 years or more, while inhalation of solvents is more common in younger subjects—a circumstance corroborated by subsequent research (2).

Three percent of the study population was found to have consumed pharmaceutical drugs for other than therapeutic purposes in doses ranging up to four or five pills at a time. The average age of this group's members was 26.

Simultaneous consumption of two or more drugs (not including alcoholic beverages) was observed in 5% of the study population. In all cases marijuana was one of the drugs involved. The average age of this group's members was 27.

The study concluded that the risk of drug dependency varied greatly and was affected by education, nutrition, housing, social security, and other variables.

## DRUGS AND DELINQUENCY

Another study performed in 1983 dealt with two populations of detainees. The report of this study, entitled "Detentions and Drugs," describes how subjects with criminal records were investigated to examine possible associations with drug abuse. For this purpose two parallel surveys were carried out. In one, arrest records from police files at the Ministry of Public Security were studied to determine the number of drug-related arrests that had been made; and in the other, minors detained at the Luis Felipe González Flores Juvenile Orientation Center were studied to ascertain the number

having some connection with drugs—even though they may not have been arrested for drug abuse.

The first study covered the years 1981 and 1982. Of the 11,358 detentions for general crimes in 1981, it was found that 1,658 were related to drugs not including alcohol, while in 1982 the respective figures were 13,738 and 1,322. A study sample consisting of 2,745 of those detained in connection with these drug-related crimes was then examined. It was found that 10% of these 2,745 detainees were minors 16 or 17 years of age, while a majority (57%) were young people 18 to 24. Forty-two percent had already been detained on more than two occasions; 55% were released without being sent to any correctional institution. Most (85%) of those detained were males; most (89%) of the detentions took place in the San José metropolitan area; and in 79% of the cases the principal cause of the subject's last arrest was the inhalation of industrial solvents.

In the second study, 77 male youngsters, the entire inmate population at the Felipe González Flores Orientation Center (a detention center for juvenile offenders under age 18), were interviewed over a one-week period. Sixty-four percent of them used drugs other than alcohol habitually, and 94% had previously been detained at one time or another. Fifty-eight percent used marijuana and had acquired the habit between the ages of 9 and 15, while 43% used inhalants and had been initiated into the practice between the ages of 8 and 15. The product used most by the inhalers (67%) was shoe cement; most of the shoe cement inhalers (56%) had inhaled it as a group activity; only 23% had undergone any kind of therapy.

This study revealed that there is extensive consumption, possession, and trafficking of drugs among juvenile delinquents, and that by and large these

practices have not been adequately detected.

## DRUG CONSUMPTION SURVEY

Another 1983 project, one carried out with very limited resources in parallel with research on alcoholism, was the "Preliminary Study on Drug Consumption in Costa Rica" (4). This study employed a sample population of 1,399 individuals over 14 years of age who were selected on the basis of 1973 census data.

The individuals selected, 91% of whom responded to the survey, lived in the following localities: Puntarenas (Central District), Limón (Valle de la Estrella), Desamparados (urban area), Heredia (rural area), and Santa Cruz (mixed rural and urban areas).

The results showed that 4.2% of the study subjects were regular users of drugs other than alcohol. In addition, another 2.4% of the respondents were classified as experimental users—because they had abused some kind of drug one to three times in the past. Thus 6.6% of the study population had been involved with drugs other than alcohol to some extent; significantly, males accounted for the lion's share (5.8%) of those involved.

Marijuana was the drug most widely used, followed by industrial solvents and various other drugs. The use of illicit drugs—including hashish, hallucinogens, and cocaine—was restricted to small groups. Geographically, the highest percentage of drug users within the study population (8.7%) was found in port areas.

All in all this project, which sought to make a preliminary assessment of the extent of the drug problem in Costa Rica, turned out to be an important guide; it also suggested areas for future examination—such as the advisability of not using criteria for alcoholism to identify drug users, reasons why some peo-

ple refused to respond to the survey, the need to enlarge the population sample and the number of variables studied, and the importance of selecting a specific sample.

## INHALATION OF SOLVENTS

A 1984 IAFA study (see "Drug Inhalers among Minors in a Marginal Community"—2) sought to assess the extent of voluntary inhalation of industrial solvents among minors 7 to 18 years of age. The study population consisted of all 98 youths in this age group who were living in the "Ranchos de Calderón" slum in the south of metropolitan San José. Data on minors under 15 were obtained first by eliciting basic information from their mothers and then by directly observing the activities of the youngsters themselves. For subjects over age 15 direct interview was the principal research method employed.

Analysis of the collected data revealed that 12% of the study population inhaled industrial solvents. Twenty-eight percent of the users were between 15 and 18 years of age, and the product inhaled most often was shoe glue. The most common age cited for beginning the habit was 10 years.

It was concluded that in some cases solvent inhalation serves as an initiation ritual for young people, one that demonstrates valor to a peer group. In addition, the sensations obtained from inhaling solvents provide adolescents with an escape from depressive emotional disturbances that are common at this stage of life.

## STUDENTS AND DRUGS

In 1985 a survey was conducted of student attitudes toward drugs (see "Student Attitudes toward Alcohol and Drugs"—5) that collected limited data on

drug use. The study sample consisted of 818 high school students from urban and rural areas. In all, 6.4% of these students said they had experimented with some drug other than alcohol on a previous occasion. Of these, 76% of the drug users said they had smoked marijuana and 24% said they had sniffed glue. However, 63% indicated their drug use had been merely experimental, and 25% said it was occasional; only 6% said it was habitual, while only 6% reported heavy use.

## **DRUGS AND THE FEMALE PRISON POPULATION**

Another 1985 survey (see "Detention and Drugs: A Study of the Adult Female Prison Population"—6) sought to complement the earlier survey of young male detainees (3) so as to develop a general profile of the drug problem and drug abuse among subjects with criminal records. This survey included all 78 female inmates at the Buen Pastor Penitentiary, who were given an interview questionnaire and asked to answer 53 questions designed to elicit sociodemographic data and information related to initiation and development of drug abuse.

Over half (53%) of the inmates were identified as drug users. The principal drugs used were marijuana (by 93% of the users), inhalants (by 44%), and cocaine (by 42%). A majority (56%) of those involved with drugs were deemed to be heavy users.

Forty-one percent of the users said they had their first contact with drugs before the age of 14, and 82% said the initial contact occurred before age 19. However, different ages of initiation tended to be associated with different drugs. For instance, nearly half (47%) of those using inhalants began doing so between 10 and 14 years of age, and 88% began using them before age 19. In a similar vein, 80%

of the population using marijuana had been initiated into its use before age 19. In contrast, cocaine use tended to begin later. Only 36% of the cocaine users said they began using the drug when they were 15 to 19 years old, while 50% said they did so between 20 and 29.

Considering all drugs combined, the highest percentage of users was found in the 20–29 year age group. Inmates in the 17–19 group tended to favor marijuana, inhalants, and psychoactive drugs and plants over cocaine, whose users typically were over 20 years of age.

Average years of schooling found for the inmates indicated that users of marijuana (with an average of 7.4 years of school) and cocaine (7.8 years) had received more formal education than the users of inhalants (5.8 years), pharmaceuticals (5.3 years), and psychoactive plants (5.6 years).

Regarding legal classification of the inmates' crimes, 25% were said to be drug-related. Within the specific prison population, most of the crimes were committed by women 18 years of age or older who had more than a primary education.

## **PREVALENCE OF DRUG ABUSE**

In 1987 a major study was conducted on drug use within the general Costa Rican population 14 to 60 years of age (see "Study on the Prevalence of Drug Consumption in Costa Rica"—7). A stratified, multistaged sample of 2,700 persons was divided into strata of high, average, and low risk corresponding to 104 small census tracts, each containing 10 residences. Data on this sample were obtained by means of a structured questionnaire that collected both sociodemographic and drug-related information.

The results indicated that 3.5% of the total study population had abused drugs (not including alcohol or tobacco) at one

time or another and that most (92%) of those involved were males. Fifty-eight percent of the drug users were between 20 and 29 years of age, and 93% were under 40. Regarding intensity of use, 62.4% of the users consumed drugs experimentally, 9.5% did so occasionally, 8.7% habitually, and 19.4% heavily. With respect to drug types, 91.4% of those involved used marijuana, equal percentages of 8.5% used inhalants, tranquilizers, and hallucinogens, and a somewhat smaller percentage (5.7%) used cocaine.

This survey also collected information on tobacco use. It was found that 31% of the study population was smoking at the time of the survey, while only 7% of the survey subjects were former smokers who had stopped. More than half the users of both sexes had acquired the smoking habit before age 17.

## CONCLUSIONS

This review of recent IAFA studies demonstrates that in recent years Costa Rica has seen a notable rise in the consumption of illicit drugs, the most prevalent of which is marijuana. This problem is seen as affecting primarily the young male population. Relevant levels of cocaine use have also started to occur.

It should also be pointed out that a noteworthy association has been found between drug abuse and consumption of alcohol and tobacco. No particular problem has been observed with regard to abuse of pharmaceuticals—which demonstrates the effectiveness of actions

taken by the Department for Control of Drugs and Intoxicants. However, it does appear appropriate to consider measures designed to keep the young female population from following the current drug consumption trends of their young male counterparts.

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