





HOOKED

SPAIN'S WAR AGAINST DRUGS

WORDS BY ALBERTO DÍAZ

IN 2006 SPAIN overtook the United States in having the highest per capita number of cocaine users in the world. In 2007 well over 2.5 tonnes of cocaine was seized at Madrid's Barajas airport alone and it has been estimated that 94% of all euro notes circulating in Spain have traces of the drug. In 2005 the country accounted for half of all the seizures of cannabis resin in Europe and three quarters of the total amount seized. Spain, quite clearly, is at the forefront of the European war against drugs. ►



Unfortunately, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), Spain has become the gateway for drugs entering Europe. An impossible to protect, 3,000km coastline has made Spain vulnerable and a gift to determined smugglers, with Galicia's rugged stretch nicknamed the 'Sicily of Spain'. Originally renowned for its tobacco smuggling, this area is now the main entry point for cocaine from Latin America. Meanwhile, Spain's proximity to Morocco (which produces 70% of the world's cannabis resin) means that it is the obvious place to land and distribute the drug throughout Europe.

Spain has many Moroccan, North African and Latino immigrants living and working in the country, together with strong cultural and linguistic ties with South America. Some of these people provide an ideal network for traffickers and, having assimilated into Spanish life, are able to move drugs with little difficulty into the rest of Europe.

The problem for Spain is that there is always eventually a correlation between drug trafficking and actual usage. Smugglers pay off distributors with drugs and the drugs themselves are generally cheaper the closer they are to the point of distribution. As a consequence, drug usage in Spain

has increased, encouraged by the new wealth produced across Spanish society by the long economic boom of the past fifteen years. This has been exacerbated by an acceptance of drug taking, particularly with regard to

cannabis, amphetamines and (most dangerous of all) cocaine.

Between 1986 and 1996 there was an explosion of heroin consumption, but that has constantly declined over the past ten years. Considered 'dirty' and dangerous due to its intravenous use, it is now mostly confined to the margins of society. That said, 15% of all addicts being treated now were addicted to heroin and some 80,000 people in Spain are currently being prescribed methadone to wean them off it.

But the real problem now is cocaine, which has spread rapidly through Spain during the past ten years, initially using the drug distribution networks previously set up for heroin users. Cocaine, however, has penetrated every strata of Spanish

society from the poor to the educated and wealthy. Highly addictive and an expensive habit to maintain, it has managed what heroin never could. It is perceived as a 'clean' drug - perhaps because it is a white powder that is mostly inhaled without the awkward and intrusive paraphernalia of syringes and needles.

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THE LAW IN SPAIN

- 1 Drug use and possession for personal use is not a criminal offence
- 2 Public consumption is penalised by administrative fines
- 3 Trafficking drugs is a criminal offence and severely punished

Cocaine is widely considered to be an acceptable recreational drug, with the United Nations estimating that it is consumed by 1% of the Spanish adult population. It is an effective stimulant both physically and psychologically and is, with its easy administration, ideal for socialising. In the words of Francisco Verdu Asensi, vice-president of the Spanish Association for the Study of Drug Addictions, "cocaine was guaranteed to be successful in the environment of pleasure and recreational activities."

The trouble is that the more cocaine you take the more you need to gain the same effect, until it becomes an all-encompassing habit that will destroy every aspect of your life. As Asensi says, with the authority of a specialist psychologist, cocaine quickly produces for an addict "multiple complications... physical, psychological, social, judicial and economic" with any treatment a "tortuous journey" against the tide of a horrendous sickness.

Wesley Pia Escopardo, chief co-ordinator for the Proyecto Horizonte in Gandia on the Costa Blanca, agrees. "There is no safe or acceptable drug and that includes alcohol. The end result of drug taking is always the same - a ruined life that will be desperately hard to put back together." This includes cannabis, despite its 'safe' ▶

the drugs

Amphetamines, Ecstasy & LSD

These are synthetic drugs that stimulate the central nervous system creating increased confidence, sociability, energy, euphoria and raised sensory awareness. Generally, synthetic drugs are taken in pill form, but they can also be snorted and, less commonly, injected or smoked.

In 2005 world production of synthetic drugs was estimated at 479 tonnes. It has been estimated by the EMCDDA that almost 9.5 million Europeans have tried ecstasy, with almost 3 million having taken it in the past year. It is often associated with young people and the clubbing scene.

Cannabis

The most commonly used illicit drug in the world - over 13 million Europeans will have used it during the past 30 days. Known by a variety of names, such as marijuana, hashish, ganja and skunk, it is a psychoactive product of the plant *cannabis sativa*. Whilst it has some medicinal qualities, it is mainly used as a recreational drug and is most commonly smoked, inhaled over a vapouriser or consumed orally.

A study published in the British medical journal *The Lancet* in 2007 stated that cannabis users have on average a 41% greater risk of developing psychosis than non-users. It can cause short-term memory loss, anxiety, panic attacks and reduce dexterity and reaction times.

Cocaine

Cocaine is used as a recreational drug, although crack cocaine (the much stronger version) is normally used by marginalised sectors of society and is extremely addictive. Cocaine produces a short-lived feeling of exhilaration, whilst crack cocaine dangerously produces a brief "intensity of pleasure completely outside the normal range of human experience".

After cannabis, cocaine is the world's most trafficked drug with global seizures in 2005 amounting to 756 tonnes. Over 12 million Europeans (about 4% of the adult population) have tried cocaine at least once in their lifetime.

Opioids (Mainly Heroin)

Heroin is normally either 'brown' or the much rarer 'white' heroin from South East Asia. A highly addictive and harmful drug, heroin produces a sense of euphoria and wellbeing (diamorphine being 2-3 times more potent than morphine), followed by extremely unpleasant and powerful withdrawal symptoms. Heroin is also associated with HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, drug overdoses and poly-drug use. Roughly 6,600 tonnes of opium were produced worldwide in 2006 - with (incredibly) 92% still coming from Afghanistan and the rest, mainly, from Myanmar.

image. In fact, it is the first step on the drugs ladder and can have enormously harmful effects, particularly on immature bodies.

There is an indication that drug taking in Spain is stabilising on the whole, with some signs of a decrease. Indeed, a positive report (Estudes 2006-2007) recently stated that students believe drugs are too easy to obtain. This appears to be the first step in reducing usage - a change in the very perception of the acceptability of drug taking.

The majority of Spanish professionals seem to agree that the most effective way of fighting drug use is for society to openly acknowledge that a significant

"the real problem now is cocaine, which has spread rapidly through Spain during the past ten years"

problem already exists. This should then prompt a philosophical change in what society believes is acceptable conduct. Because now, as Escolando points out, "everyone expects instant gratification in their lives, regardless of how it is obtained. And drugs dangerously deliver, in the short term, exactly that gratification - with no effort or sacrifice required."

Interestingly, one of the important strategies used by the Proyecto Hombre to wean addicts off drugs is to prove that it is possible to enjoy life without them. Outdoor activities and social events are therefore a vital part of the rehabilitation process. However, whilst it is

reasonably easy to wean addicts off drugs, the temptation to return to them remains. This is often quickly and disastrously initiated by the addict encountering some new problem in their life which they feel unable to surmount without the 'reassuring' effects of a drug.

As Spain slides inexorably into recession, the concern must be that drug taking will increase along with the proliferation of serious social and economic problems as the population becomes ever more stressed. As Asensi states, "alcoholic drinks are a natural refuge during a recession", and this is probably now also true for drugs. In which case, the coming years may see a further surge in the appalling tragedy of drug usage and addiction in Spain. ■



**"Listen to me, and please listen well
When you ride with cocaine, you are
headed for hell"**

Anon (www.cocaine.org)

**"A cocaine addict can easily spend
1,000 euros a weekend to feed
his habit"**

Vicente Pla Escolando
Chief co-ordinator, Proyecto Hombre

**"There is more cocaine in Spain than
in any other European country"**

Francisco Verdu Asensi
Vice-president of the Spanish Association for
the Study of Drug Addiction

on the frontline

Vicente Pla Escolando is the chief co-ordinator for the Proyecto Hombre in Gandia, which deals with male drug addiction. 46 years old, he is charming, smiles easily, speaks softly and radiates a sense of calm authority. Clearly, he is someone used to hearing confidences and remaining discreet. We sit across a glass-topped table to discuss Spain's war against drugs.

"I have been working with drug addicts since 1991. It is my life's work and intensely important to me. I first encountered drug problems with my friends many years ago and I saw first-hand the terrible effects they had - not just on my immediate friends, but also upon their utterly devastated families. Rehabilitating drug addicts is sensitive, delicate work that requires the careful long-term development of a relationship of trust. To young drug addicts I become a proxy 'father' figure, whilst with older addicts I become something between a councillor and a caring elder 'brother'.

Obviously, I become an intricate part of the new lives that the rehabilitating addicts need to construct - as it is vital for any addict to leave behind their 'previous life' and many of their damaging, drug-related relationships. To do this, all addicts need constant professional support.

For me, it is always a source of great joy when someone manages to conquer their drug addiction. However, all too often, addicts return to take drugs again when something bad occurs to destabilise them. As a society we need to properly understand the severe damage drugs cause and to change radically our mentality about what is and is not acceptable."

