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Activo distribution and paraphernalia among “street children”

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. The use of solvent inhalants has been documented in Mexico since the 1970s. Nevertheless, very little is known about the distribution and use dynamics among “street children”. Few have ventured to study this issue because of the difficulties involved in working with marginalized, relatively inaccessible populations. **Objective.** To analyze the distribution and consumption dynamics of *activo*, as it is known among street children in downtown Mexico City, and to document the paraphernalia and argot associated with these practices. **Method.** This is a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative study guided by the “Meeting Place” approach used by Hughes (1977), which has been adapted to Mexican population by Ortiz (1979). We also used ethnographic observation techniques and a social and immersion mapping of street spaces that allowed us to contact and relate to both informants and users. **Results.** We identified activo distributors and storage areas; user groups were made up of men and women in a 7-3 ratio; physical and psycho-social characteristics of sellers and users, and some street argot and paraphernalia that allowed us to understand the dynamics of distribution and consumption. **Discussion and conclusion.** The activo market is both captive and hidden; it is detrimental to the physical and mental health of street children, and is fostered by social exclusion and the lack of legislation.

Keywords: Street children, drugs, inhalants, solvents, distribution, Mexico City.

RESUMEN

Introducción. El consumo de solventes inhalables se ha documentado en México desde la década de 1970; sin embargo, poco se sabe sobre la dinámica de distribución y consumo entre los “niños de la calle”. Este tema se ha estudiado poco por las dificultades inherentes al trabajo con poblaciones marginales y de difícil acceso. **Objetivo.** Analizar la dinámica de distribución y consumo del “activo” entre los “niños de la calle” de la zona centro de la Ciudad de México, así como documentar la parafernalia y el argot asociados a estas prácticas. **Método.** Es un estudio de tipo cualitativo, de carácter descriptivo-interpretativo, guiado por el enfoque llamado “Lugares de Reunión” empleado por Hughes (1977) y adaptado a población mexicana por Ortiz (1979). También se emplearon técnicas etnográficas de observación, mapeo social e inmersión en los espacios de calle, que sirvieron para contactar y establecer un vínculo con los informantes y consumidores. **Resultados.** Se identifican distribuidores y zonas de almacenamiento del activo; grupos de consumidores formados por hombres y mujeres en una proporción de 7 a 3; signos físicos y características psicosociales de vendedores y usuarios, así como el argot y parafernalia; lo que permite comprender la dinámica de distribución y consumo. **Discusión y conclusión.** El mercado del activo es cautivo y oculto, deteriora la salud física y mental de los “niños de la calle” y es promovido además por la exclusión social y la falta de legislación.

Palabras clave: Niños de la calle, drogas, inhalantes, disolventes inhalables, distribución, Ciudad de México.

INTRODUCTION

Inhalant use by children, teenagers and young adults is not a new phenomenon and has been documented in Mexico since the 1970s (Leal, Mejía, Gómez & Salinas, 1978). Since then, drug use trends have been tracked through home and school surveys (Villatoro et al., 2012; Villatoro et al., 2016). Other studies have been undertaken for vulnerable populations, including children and teenagers working and living in the streets (Gutiérrez, Medina-Mora & Vega, 2007; Domínguez, Romero & Paul, 2000). Moreover, periodic records are kept of people who visit health or law enforcement facilities (Ortiz, Meza & Martínez, 2014) due to drug-related and other problems. However, the inhalable solvents market has been scarcely studied.

Accordingly, our work focuses on *activo* distribution (solvent of industrial use based on toluene). It first appeared on the streets in the 1990s, replacing paint thinner and glue, which were used in previous decades. Activo is a substance with a similar effect to other inhalants, but with a more attractive smell and flavor. As part of this research project we analyzed different samples of toluene distributed, sold, and used in downtown Mexico City, and found it to be almost pure (98%). This substance affects the nervous system producing tiredness, confusion, weakness, memory loss, nausea, loss of appetite, loss of hearing, and loss of vision. Other studies have reported that children and adolescents preferred activo over other inhalants because it produces a greater high with fewer adverse consequences compared with paint thinner (Gutiérrez & Vega, 2003).

Distribution of activo among “street children” – though chronologically adults, emotionally and behaviorally they are more similar to children – has not been studied because of the difficulty of working with marginalized, “hidden” and “inaccessible” populations (Ortiz et al., 2003). Little is known about the routes this substance follows between each link in the complicated buy-sell chain. This report therefore seeks to share the results of three years of research by describing and analyzing activo distribution and use processes among street children in the Historic Center of Mexico City.

Some of the country’s most important economic, political, and cultural activities are concentrated in the Historic Center. There, the San Hipólito church, visited monthly by devotees of San Judas Tadeo, is also a place where young adults, teenagers, and street children come together to sell and use inhalants. Previous studies and other sources of information pointed out that, as it was an area of risk because of crime, and the sale and use of substances, training and the implementation of strategies were required before undertaking fieldwork there (MacLean, 2007; Gutiérrez, Vega & Rodríguez, 2008; Vega et al., 2002; Santamaría et al., 1989).

This particular solvent, which is used as a drug, is a petroleum derivative, its primary ingredient being toluene

(Forster, Tannhauser & Tannhauser, 1994), as is the case with other industrial solvents including thinner, turpentine, gasoline, and cleaning fluids that have been studied for decades because of their psychoactive uses, availability, low cost, and minimal regulation (Natera, 1978).

Occasional exposure to activo – solvent of industrial use – produces headaches, dizziness and nausea (MacLean, 2008). Chronic use produces depression of the central nervous system (CNS), alteration of neuropsychological functions, necrosis, nerve degeneration, and addiction (Piscocoy, 2000; Martínez et al., 2002; Ortiz et al., 1992; Medina-Mora & Castro, 1984). Nevertheless, its production, transport, and use are legal since it is an industrial substance, which means that its storage, purchase, sale, distribution, transport, and consumption are not punishable by law. The salesman or dealer cannot be sanctioned, unless the buyer is under age.

The Historic Center receives a large population of migrants from other states and countries looking for better work and life opportunities; this vulnerable sector consumes a significant portion of activo in the zone. Social and economic factors such as exclusion and poverty coupled with a dearth of legislation cause and maintain the practices of substance abuse which are exacerbated by the physical, emotional and mental deterioration of street children (Medina-Mora et al., 2001).

Our objective here is to analyze the dynamics of activo distribution and use among street children in downtown Mexico City and to document the paraphernalia and argot associated with these practices.

METHOD

This is a qualitative, descriptive, interpretative study guided by the “Meeting Places” approach used by Hughes (1977) and adapted to Mexican population by Ortiz (1979). A natural interpretative approach was used by spending time with users and dealers on various days and at different times. This made it possible to understand and interpret a concrete reality, regardless of the cause-effect relations (Ortiz, 1979). We also used ethnographic observation techniques and a social and immersion mapping of street spaces that allowed us to contact and relate to both informants and users. Although the goal was not to undertake any type of intervention, during the course of the study areas where support was required were identified to address some of the problems associated with activo consumption, such as sexually transmitted diseases, accidents, lesions, and overdoses, and, where appropriate, refer users for treatment.

Two main informants and two fieldworkers participated in the research. They all had backgrounds in social studies, including social psychology and anthropology, and previous experience with drug use research in urban contexts.

Procedure

Once the researchers' interaction with the street population had been accepted, the latter consent to participate in this study and be interviewed (without being recorded) was requested. The Nvivo program was used to analyze the transcriptions. The researchers began by explaining the objectives and the voluntary nature of their participation, and guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

RESULTS

Contact was established with eighteen groups of children and people living in the streets with whom the researchers worked over the course of three years (2011-2014), mainly on weekends and during the monthly San Judas Tadeo festivities (Ortiz, Domínguez & Palomares, 2015). Group size oscillated between five and one hundred and eighty members, who frequently interacted with each other due to the proximity of their camps and residential areas.

Sociodemographic data

The groups included activo distributors, sellers and users, and they comprised men and women in a 7-3 ratio. The street population's ages ranged from new born to fifty and older, the average age being twenty-five. Some of them were illiterate, most had failed to complete elementary school, and a minority had attended middle school.

There were a variety of professions represented in these groups including bread makers, electricians, construction workers, tailors, windshield washers, "fakirs" (individuals who lie down on broken glass for coins), plastic bottles of PET (polyethylene terephthalate), paper and iron collectors, or simply beggars on the streets and in public transport. Some also carried out maintenance jobs at semi-permanent shops, cleaning, guarding, and sleeping in there. Still others were "franeleros" (individuals who look after cars in the street), candy sellers on the subway, clowns or dancers. A few worked as "chacales" or men who play a submissive role in sex with other men. Some of the women were sex workers.

Most of these children and young adults were originally from states all over the country who had migrated to Mexico City looking for a better life. Others were from conurbation zones or other boroughs in Mexico City.

When migrants arrive in the area, they join groups already living on the streets, acquiring a sense of belonging by recreating the original structure they left behind (Forselledo, 2001).

Children, adolescents, and young people living on the streets are recognizable by their over-sized clothing, which they are given by passers-by or find in garbage cans

(Domínguez, Romero & Paul, 2000). They usually have a slow, unstable stride, and sometimes have tremors as a result of chronic activo use or trauma from fights or accidents (such as being run over).

Activo use is a part of the everyday lives of these people, most of whom are poly-users of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. A minority have also used other drugs including crack and cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, mushrooms, and peyote.

Activo distribution

Activo reaches the Historic Center through a complex system of theft and transport that begins with clandestine taps installed in fuel ducts running across the country between refineries and storage and distribution sites. The stolen substance is transported to Mexico City by tankers and other vehicles hidden in poor neighborhoods, houses, industrial or commercial establishments (leather, shoe, tool and hardware shops) and so called "narco-tienditas".

Language and paraphernalia

The jargon associated with the use and sale of activo consists of verbal language and unwritten codes associated with the street children's knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Among the terms used for the substance and its paraphernalia are the following:

Mona, charco, charquito, and calacazo

Mona is the most popular way to use activo. It consists of a piece of paper or cloth, such as a activo-soaked napkin, toilet paper, gauze, cotton, or tow carried in the palm of the hand, that can be placed over the nose and mouth for inhalation. This behavior is called *monear*. Mona comes in two presentations. 1. Mona for soaking: The user carries the cloth or paper in his hand for the dealer to "soak"; 2. Prepared mona: The dealer provides the user with a pre-soaked rag or paper. Mona prices oscillated between five and ten Mexican pesos approximately (.28 - .56 dls). The term "mona" was originally used by carpenters to refer to a ball of tow cloth soaked in varnish used with a distinctive wrist motion to apply the substance to wood. It was first called *muñecazo*, or wrist movement, term which slowly evolved into the popular name mona.

Charco. This is a PET bottle containing 200 milliliters of activo. It costs between ten and fifteen Mexican pesos (approximately .56 - 2.78 dls), and yields five or six monas. The dealer usually carries a liter or a liter and a half bottle inside a bag or in his pant leg; it is taken out only to refill a charco or soak monas.

Calacazo. This term has various meanings: 1. It refers to receiving the leftover drops of charco as a gift; this usually happens when the user is no longer able to raise the money to buy a mona; 2. It refers to the minimum quantity of activo to make a "mini-mona"; this usually happens when

the user only has two pesos but feels an urgent need to use drugs; 3. It refers to the symbolic death of the charco, as in: “the activo is all used up” and 4. It refers to the sensation or desire for death experienced by the user and derived from a real or imaginary sense of danger associated with running out of activo to inhale. This is similar to what happens among the “escuadrón de la muerte” o “teporochos” in the area: these are indigent or street drunks living and sleeping on the street. They have serious alcohol addictions and are at a constant risk of dying. They have a ritual they call “la tómbola”: one stick for each member is placed in a bag, the members then draw the sticks one by one until someone gets the short stick, thus “winning the opportunity” –or privilege– of ingesting all the group’s alcohol until he dies. Winning this lottery is considered a blessing by the winner, who thinks that the best thing that can happen in life is to die surrounded by friends.

The sales dynamics

There is at least one official dealer in each group. This position is earned through experience in street survival, the length of time spent in the zone, and drug use, in addition to trust built up with the substance provider over the years. The dealer is not just a salesman; he is also the distributor and has a double responsibility to his group: on the one hand, he has to go to the drop off zone day and night to buy the activo required by his group; on the other, he has to return with the substance and distribute it through the sellers he employs. Along the way the dealer may face different forms of violence from: a) other dealers who “own” territories protected by employees through which he has to go through, b) public and private agents charged with “caring for” and “gentrifying” the city; which means that street people are an insult or threat that should be handed over to law enforcement authorities if they do not pay their “dues,” c) other gangs or groups of street people, and finally d) thieves that assault passers-by.

Along the way there are also numerous places where other types of drugs can be bought. The flow of dealers and addicts from all around the city is constant at all hours. The cost of taking this risky trip is paid by the users who buy mona and charco.

Ant sales. This is the simplest, best concealed way to sell, and is carried out behind the dealer’s back. The “clandestine” seller has a charco hidden in his clothes and he uses it to soak the buyer’s mona –which is hidden in his hand– in a flash. Since it is a hidden sale, the “official” dealer does not notice it, the drug does not evaporate and the police does not catch them in the act.

The dealer. One of the most important figures in this study is the dealer, an individual who is socially recognized and authorized to sell to the group. He plays a privileged role and is able to wield power over the group (Hughes, 1977), (Ortiz, 1979). The dealer does not wish to attract at-

tention, but cannot help being noticed because he dresses differently, does not use activo, and tends to have a hostile attitude both inside and outside the group. The dealer is a loner, constantly lies, and keeps his distance from everyone. The attitude dealers have is intimidating, aggressive, and repressive towards others. He rarely shows feelings and appears immune to pain.

According to the dealers, they establish ties with the police through periodic payments. In return they are allowed to work; bribes cover “turf rights”. Within the group, the dealer is the only one who has money, which garners him prestige, power and respect mixed with fear: if other group members snitch about his sales, it could cost them their lives.

The dealer handles sales. The dealer sells, fixes prices, and controls the quantity of activo for sale; he may dilute the substance to earn more money. Prices may fluctuate depending on factors such as where the buyer is from, whether he is from within the group or an outsider, the user’s urgency to use, and the availability of the substance. If the user protests or confronts the dealer in any way, he jeopardizes his place in the group and his physical integrity (Cuerno, 2013).

Hidden sale areas. One of the most common distribution and sales scenarios were the improvised tents set up in empty lots, abandoned spaces, small run-down squares or sidewalks that the street children preferred despite being constantly pushed out of them. Although most people who came and went from these tents belonged to drug groups, users also came from other parts of the city.

There were also less hidden spaces where activo was sold such as sidewalks and plazas. These were less protected areas, leaving group members vulnerable to frequent aggressions from other street gangs or the police. As with the other spaces, not just anyone could come to buy activo.

The sellers. The sellers worked for the dealer and were strategically located near hiding places for activo, like the base of a lamp post, garbage cans, planters, etc. Sellers must go unnoticed in order to preserve both their clients and points of sale.

Sellers are also activo users and dealers often pay them with activo. They have a mutual agreement that allows the sellers to be protected within the dealer’s zone. Their primary job is to sell to “outside users” and watch the group’s territory.

Most sales were made on Saturdays and Sundays and on the 28th of each month when the San Judas Tadeo festivities are held and thousands of pilgrims visit San Hipólito Church to worship their patron saint (Ortiz, Domínguez & Palomares, 2015).

A complete business. Activo distribution generates a “micro economy” by being very lucrative. For example, one liter of activo can soak at least thirty monas, and earnings can be up to five times the investment. Aside from cloths,

activo can be distributed through baby bottles. In the case of these sales, earnings are three times the investment.

The commercial presentation of activo is PVC (cleaner). It is sold in 250 milliliter cans; however, the downtown users prefer the street version sold by charco or mona because it is cheaper, easier to obtain, apparently "tastes different", and has "a stronger hit" with a more noticeable effect. PVC (activo) is sold in commercial stores where street people are not allowed and sale to minors is prohibited.

Street children can also get toluene from the paint thinner sold at hardware stores, although the flavor is too strong; they say it tastes like gasoline or turpentine. They do not trust it because "thinner is not for human consumption, but activo sold in Tepito is." Tepito is a neighborhood in the area of the Historic Center of Mexico City. It is characterized by its high prevalence of activities related to violent events, such as smuggling, counterfeiting, and selling and distributing drugs. The street sale of activo in the streets of the Historic Center is a very profitable business.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Activo distribution exists largely because it has a captive market. Survival on the street is extremely difficult for street children who do not use it. The Historic Center receives a large population of migrants from other states and countries looking for better work and life opportunities. This vulnerable sector consumes a significant portion of activo in the zone. Social and economic factors such as exclusion and poverty coupled with a dearth of legislation cause and maintain the practices of substance abuse and are exacerbated by the physical, emotional and mental deterioration of the street children (Medina-Mora, 2001).

Activo distribution is a complex, hidden, and lucrative business where sales and profit are more important than the users' mental or physical health, or the social and familial deterioration caused by substance abuse (Altamirano et al., 2002).

Distribution of these substances intended for industrial use – PVC (activo), thinner, gasoline, glue, etc. – is a red flag indicating a social problem: the deterioration of highly vulnerable populations including boys, girls, teenagers, women, migrants, and people who live, work, and survive on the streets (Cárdenas, 2009).

The ease of distribution and sale of activo aggravates the problem of use, disrupts social spheres, and brings about worrying rates of use in sectors of the population which formerly did not have high levels of use, particularly adolescent and student populations. As can be seen, activo has become the drug of choice for all these sectors (Cruz & Domínguez, 2011; Villatoro, Cruz, Ortiz & Medina-Mora, 2011).

Street children and other adolescents are the final link in the clandestine chain which starts with large-scale sub-

stance theft and passes through storage in inaccessible storage facilities before reaching them in the streets in the form of charcos, bottles, and monas. The solution to this complex problem goes beyond just taking hits away from users, explaining them that it is damaging or making attempts to understand that they do it to avoid cold and hunger. A more aggressive strategy would involve interrupting the overall distribution and sale of inhalable solvents.

A point for future research is the probable use of industrial solvents to produce other psychoactive substances. This link might explain why activo is also sold at so-called narco-tienditas alongside drugs like marijuana, cocaine, and crack.

Inhalable solvents are not specifically produced to alter people's emotional and physical functions. This legal status restricts the design and implementation of public policies that could serve as a normative framework. However, inhalable solvents are considered in health laws and regulations, and are the subject of international conventions on drug use, which provide opportunities for the design of regulatory action, attention, and intervention to achieve damage reduction.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the techniques, tools, and methodological strategies used by researchers to approach, enter, and remain in the zone and interact with distributors and dealers must be adapted to specific contexts and populations. It is also important to note that during the three years of this research, seven street children were murdered when they were trying to stop using activo and had been off the drug for several weeks. One of our hypotheses points to the sellers' unwillingness for these children to "set a bad example" by giving up the drug.

Contact and interaction with distributors, sellers, and active users is extremely complex, as they belong to inaccessible contexts and populations (Díaz, 1999; Fernández, 1999) and their lives are associated with various forms of violence. Distribution and consumption are closely linked to sexual abuse, fighting, delinquency, accidents, illnesses, baby-stealing, and murder (Gutiérrez, 2008).

When researchers interact in the "natural habitat" of these people, it requires a large investment of time, emotional exhaustion, and the latent danger of either the researcher or the respondents being attacked. Accordingly, experience and training are indispensable to work in street contexts, together with the ongoing monitoring of field work and feedback processes to establish safety, attention, intervention, and contention strategies that must be available at a moment's notice. This study shows the importance of publishing articles on the methodological aspects of researching in high risk contexts, which is an ongoing commitment for our research team.

Although downtown Mexico City is home to the greatest number of street people per square kilometer, activo distribution reaches most of the city's neighborhoods, es-

pecially peripheral, poverty-stricken areas. It is important to extend research to other areas, document the dynamics of active use, sale and distribution, and identify the repercussions of use in sociodemographic profiles different from downtown Mexico City's street children.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare they have no conflict of interests.

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