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Synthetic Drugs: Costa Rica’s New Nightmare

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“Pink cocaine,” “cat,” “K2,” “spice”—those are some of the names for Costa Rica’s new nightmare: synthetic drugs. Their use among adolescents and young adults is spiraling in this Central American nation, adding a new security and public health issue to the already worrisome level of criminal activities derived from drug trafficking (NotiCen, June 16, 2016, Sept. 8, 2016, March 16, 2017).

Costa Rica is caught, as are its neighbors, in the northbound flow of drugs destined mainly for the US and in lesser volumes to European destinations. With that flow comes drug-related violence. Territorial gang wars—including daily executions by hitmen, and bajonazos, as robberies of an organization’s drugs by a rival group are known—are being waged throughout Central America, particularly in the notoriously violent Northern Triangle that encompasses El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras (NotiCen, March 24, 2016, March 31, 2016, Jan. 26, 2017).

Organized crime, mostly narcotics activities, for the 2010-2015 period took homicides in Costa Rica from an average of 527 per year to a record high of 553. Then 2016 raised the ceiling to an unprecedented 580 killings. Between Jan. 1 and May 10, 2017, Costa Rica saw 169 murders.

Some drugs stay in the area

In addition to being the corridor for the cocaine produced in South America and increasingly, for the marijuana grown in Jamaica, the Central American isthmus is increasingly turning into an area for storage and re-shipment. As in other countries along the way, portions of the drug loads remain in Costa Rica, since the local criminal teams working for international networks—guaranteeing transport, storage infrastructure, and re-shipment—are paid in kind, thus promoting the expansion of the local market.

In this scenario, designer drugs—as the more harmful, synthetic varieties of drugs are known—are gaining ground, especially among the young.

Designer drugs include amphetamines and methamphetamines, Ecstasy (also known as molly), pink cocaine, and K2 (“Spice”) and come from places as diverse as Canada, Mexico, and China. Users gather at megafiestas (mega-parties) and barras libres (open bars) where alcohol and drugs are mixed in highly dangerous, sometimes lethal, combinations.

According to local experts, K2, which originated in China, is 10 times more powerful than natural marijuana, and its effects include a rise in blood pressure as well as in body temperature, which in some cases makes users take off their clothes and run to the street naked, suffering from hallucinations.

The growing use of synthetic drugs in Costa Rica was mentioned as early as four years ago by Elena Ramírez, an expert at the Instituto Costarricense sobre Drogas (Costa Rican Drug Institute, ICD).

“International bodies are now saying that one can’t talk about producer, consumer, or transit countries any more, since this type of activity can occur in all,” she told the local online news outlet crhoy.com. “What has happened in our country is a rise in the use of synthetic drugs.”
The local television station Teletica reported in April that “drug traffickers from at least eight synthetic drug-producing countries send shipments to Costa Rica using ‘mules,’” (individuals carrying small amounts of drugs) and even the mail system.

“Nine months ago, Colombia’s National Police arrested Alejandro Arboleda Uribe, known as the Pablo Escobar of synthetic drugs,” whose organization “had a shipment of the so-called pink cocaine ready to be brought to Costa Rica,” Teletica added. Pablo Escobar was a Colombian drug lord shot and killed by Colombian police in 1993, the day after his 44th birthday. Teletica noted that pink cocaine “is 10 times more expensive” than common cocaine.

The rapidly rising popularity of designer drugs is seen mostly in the 12-30 age group, although kids as young as 10 or 11 are among its users, said Guillermo Araya, director of the ICD.

Users run serious health risks because they do not know what substances such drugs contain. Designer drugs are produced by combining “different chemical components in an artisanal procedure, completely lacking safety regarding manipulation [of substances]. What’s more important—what … turns them into substances that are far riskier for youths’ health—is that there’s no scientifically adequate dosage,” Araya told LADB.

“How much of the components that are being added to these drugs can be immediately harmful to people’s health is not specified,” Araya said. “So, imagine a youngster … using that drug, with the risk that it could cause him a cardiorespiratory attack immediately, with the first dose,” because the buyer doesn’t know the drug’s contents.

The expert spoke about the existence of “a drug avalanche” in Costa Rica. He said that trafficking organizations choose names that trick users into not perceiving the drugs as risky. “There’s a scientific rule stating that higher risk perception means lower use,” he said, adding, “the opposite is, lower risk perception, higher use.”

Thus, when starting a drug fad, “organized crime tries to label [the drugs] with attractive names and attractive colors,” he said. As an example, he mentioned ketamine, which in the US is called Special K or K, and “in Costa Rica, they gave it a very particular pseudonym, which is gato [cat],” Araya said.

“So, [when] they say: ‘I’m going to get a cat,’ it means: ‘I’m going to use ketamine,’” he explained, adding that misleading names are “part of all those strategies they [traffickers] devise,” for promoting different drugs they might launch.

**Working on prevention**

He also said that besides confiscating the highest possible volumes of drugs from traffickers, Costa Rican authorities are focusing on keeping the country’s youth away from such trends.

Prevention efforts—which include information that highlights the risks of drug consumption—are being implemented, Araya said. The idea is “to encourage youngsters to seek a life project through sports, through technology, the arts … education, and that, starting there, they see what their vocation is,” to help them build a life plan, he said.