

# **DRUG CONSUMPTION IN THE COSTA RICAN PRISON POPULATION AND ITS RELATION TO COMMITTING CRIMES**

## **Summary**

The following is a transversal, descriptive and exploratory study on the consumption of Psychoactive Substances (PAS) in the Costa Rican Penitentiary System, carried out through a survey among the prison population, to examine the relationship between consumption and committing crimes resulting in imprisonment. The study applied a random, multi-tiered and proportional sample, stratified by sex, of the entire sentenced and imprisoned population from The Institutional Attention Centers (CAI) and the Semi-Institutional Attention Centers (CASI) with a confidence interval of 95%. It was determined that in Costa Rica, 33% of crimes committed transgress the Psychotropic Law in some way. On the other hand, 34.3% of the people interviewed reported that their crimes were committed under the effects of drugs, 22.6% linked them to activities to acquire drugs for their own consumption and 33.8% related them to trafficking. In this sense, women and men differ significantly in the commission of crimes tied to drug trafficking (60% women versus 24% men). Tobacco, marijuana and crack were the principal drugs actively consumed (past month prevalence), reported as much by perception as by direct report. It was determined that to obtain drugs inside prison centers is an easy to very easy task to achieve (71% of the opinions). Moreover, it was established that at early ages, substance consumption does not have a strong tie to criminal behavior, but the type of substance is important in the type of crime committed. It was determined that the more addictive the drug, the more probability there is of associating it with committing a crime under the effects of the drug or to obtain the drug. According to the analysis areas, the major impacts on both the individual and familial level were on the economy, morale and family. Finally, in relation to the studied population's opinion, in terms of principal strategies to approach the problem of consumption and drug trafficking inside prisons, it is understood that actions will be taken to strengthen vigilance, self-help groups and therapy and the effective utilization of free time.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The need to carry out this study arose from systematic observation in the everyday practice of penitentiary institutions where, as in general society, the drug problem is worrisome, especially when it is perceived as being related to criminal behavior.

Likewise, within the principal objectives, we were interested in counting the objective elements that form the basis to estimate the cost that binomial consumption of drugs/commission of crimes imposes on the Costa Rican population.

This is not known in most of the Hemisphere's countries and estimation is necessary in order to promote adequate and opportunistic decision-making that drives the

government's focus, with respect to politics and the directives it should establish. This aspect is considered important for the MEM promoted by CICAD of the OAS.

In spite of the prevailing perception that there is a strong association between drug consumption and the commission of crimes, there has been very little work done that has attempted to respond to the uncertainty related between these two human behaviors.

When we talk of a PAS consumer, the general tendency is to establish a strong relationship between this conduct and the commission of crimes; it is impossible to not make interpretations about the role drugs play in general behavior. Upon trying to attend to the needs that the consumption provokes, we cannot omit its criminological aspects.

This study relies on two considerations:

- a) The individual drug consumer has the potential to commit crimes and to be a victim of them, considering that the substance (the drug) is an important element in different roles of criminality
- b) The concept that the drug is not the whole problem, but rather an element of that problem that demands an adequate criminal study. This study should consider the environment in which the subject develops. In this case, the ties with the behavior that transgresses against the law and the prison behaviors are factors that operate strongly

## **THE PROBLEM**

From an economic and social perspective, the situations resulting from abusive alcohol and drug consumption have important implications, which can seriously affect a country's development.

Some of these implications, from a socioeconomic perspective, include an economic burden caused by violence and the relationship between drug consumption and the commission of crimes.

Completed investigations in the U.S. and Australia, in which they analyzed the relationship between violence and alcohol, have estimated that in the majority of violent acts within a family, alcohol has been present during this act (Brookoff, 1997; Teessom, Hall & Lynsley, 2000).

Likewise, Canada has estimated that a third of its homicides are related to alcohol and drug consumption (Brochu, 1995). This relationship also has been linked with at least half of the daily sexual assaults, at a general level, be they among victims or the perpetrators (Alcohol, Research & Health, 2001).

Along with the above, studies carried out by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence mention that in the U.S., alcohol has intervened in (Gartner, 1994)

- 68% of homicides
- 62% of assaults
- 48% of robberies
- 72% of rapes
- 2/3 of child abuse cases

Moreover, the tangible costs derived from these conditions should be added to other intangible costs, such as the suffering and physical, moral and emotional pain that accompany the sufferers (Hnin, Claeson, Correia, 2002; FISAC, 2001).

Given the above, it is clear that the damage produced by drug consumption has important implications, from social and economic perspectives, due to the multiple costs that arise for the perpetrator, the victim and their families.

These costs fall on the State, as much for its political-management acceptance, as on the sociocultural organization and from a general to individual level, with grave repercussions for the State's development capacity.

It is for this reason that an imperative need exists for each society to confront the problem and to possess a rigorous and broad vision of the economic and social impact that PAS consumption generates.

The Multilateral Evaluation Mechanism (MEM) of CICAD-OAS in indicator Number 61 deals with the estimation of economic costs linked to drug consumption in the present context, particularly in the prison environment.

Having established that this study intends to contribute to the basis for the estimation of economic, human and social costs caused by drug-related crime, the following question was asked: What is the existing relationship in Costa Rica between the commission of crimes and the drug problem?

In hopes of achieving the information that offers an answer to this question, data was obtained related to the following areas:

1. Sociodemographic characteristics of the study's population
2. Prisoner's juridical situation
3. Prisoner's perception of drug consumption in jail
4. Principally consumed drugs in jail
5. Prevalence of drug consumption among the prison population
6. Relationship between criminal activities and drug consumption
7. Impact of drug consumption and commission of crimes in the different individual and familial environments of the prisoners

## **OBJECTIVES**

### **GENERAL**

- To determine PAS consumption prevalence among the prison population located in the Institutional and Semi-Institutional Level of the Costa Rican Penitentiary System
- To analyze the link between delinquent behavior and drug dependence, from a prisoner's perception, in the Institutional and Semi-Institutional Level of the Costa Rican Penitentiary System

### **SPECIFIC**

- To determine the sociodemographic profile of the prison population in the Costa Rican Penitentiary System
- To establish the lifetime prevalence (month and year) for each of the PAS consumed by the prison population subject to the study
- To determine the existing link between delinquent behavior and drug consumption in Costa Rica, according to the existing characteristics in the study's population
- To establish the effect of drug consumption and committing a crime in the prison population's different individual and familial environments
- To define strategies for the best management of the problematic PAS consumption in the Costa Rican Penitentiary System

## **MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The present study corresponds to a transversal, descriptive and exploratory study about PAS consumption in the Costa Rican Penitentiary System in the sentenced population and the relationship between the drug problem and the commission of crimes that determine imprisonment.

A random, multi-tiered, proportional sample, stratified by sex, was taken from the entire sentenced prison population, equally from the Centers of Institutional Attention (CAI), in which the person is confined 100% of the time, as in the Centers of Semi-Institutional Attention (CASI), in which the person is confined part-time, established to achieve a confidence level of 95%.

The data were obtained through the use of a questionnaire, according to the seven defined areas, where the majority of the questions were closed and precodified.

In reference to field work, the application of an instrument was executed between October 16 and November 5, 2003, for health personnel previously trained for such purposes, pertaining to the Ministry of Justice, General Office of Social Adaptation, Costa Rican Institute on Drugs and the Institute for Alcoholism and Pharmacodependency.

A total of 400 interviews were completed, with 300 men and 100 women, achieving a response rate of 100% in this phase.

The questionnaires were reviewed and later, entered in the database that was created for this end, through the program DATA ENTRY from the Statistics Packet for Social Sciences (SPSS), in D.O.S. environment, with the goal of configuring skips for questions (e.g. "go to the following question"), defining the control ranges and correcting inconsistencies.

The decision was taken to not consider a base questionnaire, given that it presented information problems, with many faulty data, inconsistencies and little legible handwriting, resulting in confusing answers.

The data analysis was done through SPSS, the tenth version for Windows, producing interest tests according to the type of variable considered in the study.

## **INFORMATION ANALYSIS**

The sociodemographic profile of the prison population in Costa Rica is defined in the following manner: mainly Costa Rican (84%); male (75%); between 18 and 45 years old (85.6%); moderately low educational level (82.3% with incomplete secondary school or less); Caucasian (86%); service workers and workers in non-professional activities (91%); with present family ties (95%).

From the above, it stands out that the prison population finds itself in an active economic age, a relevant topic for the cost estimation subject.

With respect to juridical condition, 79.7% were people sentenced for the first time.

In this sense, it was determined that in Costa Rica, 33% of the analyzed crimes had some type of relationship with misdemeanors against the Psychotropic Law.

An important piece of data found was that 30% of the studied population started its criminal behavior before 18 years old; 2.5% before 12 years old. This issue puts importance on the time of establishing preventative strategies and policies.

With respect to sex differences, men start their criminal behavior earlier than women, but between 19 until 39 years old, it is women who more often commit crimes.

On the other hand, upon evaluating the type of relationship between committing a crime and drugs, 34.3% of the people interviewed reported that their crimes were committed under the effects of some drug; 22.6% linked their crimes to activities aimed at acquiring substances for their own consumption and 33.8% related them with drug trafficking. In this sense, women have a significant difference, with respect to men, in the commission of crimes tied to drug trafficking (60% women versus 24% men).

The most transcendental, with respect to what was observed in the crime/drug relationship, resulted when 67% of the prison population valued as very important (53%) or moderately important (14%) this degree of relationship, given that this gives more consistency to what has been analyzed.

With respect to active consumption of substances (past month prevalence), as much by perception as by direct report of the studied population, tobacco, marijuana and crack were the principal drugs consumed among the prisoners.

In relation to lifetime prevalence, Table 1 shows that all drugs have prevalence importantly higher in the prison population compared to the general population. This also is repeated in the past year prevalence, excluding alcohol.

All the differences were statistically significant according to the Student t-test results for proportional comparisons.

The findings reveal that the pattern of prison population consumption, with the exception of tobacco, tends to center on illegal drugs.

92.3% of the studied population estimated that their fellow inmates were drug consumers; 65.4% considered that many or all consume them.

In terms of the age of consumption initiation, a tendency was detected that the prisoner population started earlier than the general population, significantly important at ages 13 years old and younger. In this case, women begin earlier than men, especially with cocaine, alcohol and marijuana.

The opinion of the interviewed population about the reason of drug consumption in the prison environment was mostly (84%) attributed to consumption previous to the person's entrance into the penitentiary area.

In this way, the above results cause us to consider that the prison environment reproduces patterns of external behavior, typical of the socialization process that defines the criminal profile and in some cases, reinforces it.

The above concurs with the fact that 65% of interviewed people considered that the condition of imprisonment was not a determining factor for drug consumption inside the prison area.

In terms of the relationship of violence and consumption inside the prison area, contrarily, 83% believed that this relation did indeed exist; 53.4% considered that this is a lot or excessive.

In addition, it was determined that the prison population considers obtaining drugs inside the prison centers an easy to very easy task (71% of the opinions).

These last two aspects are fundamental, in terms of the actions that the country's penitentiary authorities should consider at the time of approaching this problem.

Upon evaluating the criteria of the population regarding motives for which they consume drugs in prison centers, the majority considered the following: that it is to feel good (13.8%), to counteract critical situations of all types of PAS (12.9%) or due to curiosity (12%). Ten percent hold the opinion that group pressure matters most in this determination, and, very closely, 9% said that it was the fact of being dependent on drugs that determined consumption.

On the other hand, it was also established that at early ages, substance consumption does not have a strong link to criminal conduct. However, the type of substance is important in the type of crime committed; it was determined that the more addictive the drug, the higher probability of associating it to committing a crime under the effects of the drug or to obtain it; this is the case with cocaine in all of its forms.

The major impacts, according to analysis areas, as much on the individual as on the familial level, were economic, moral and familial. From this situation, a fundamental base can be derived for the interest of the intangible costs related to the subject.

Finally, in relation to the principal strategies to approach the problem of drug consumption and trafficking within prisons, the opinions demonstrate an understanding of actions to strengthen vigilance, strengthen and increase the self-help groups and therapy, and to foster and support the effective utilization of free time.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Eighty-five percent of the imprisoned population find themselves within the second and fourth decade of their lives, an economically active age, an aspect that for the Costa Rican state in terms of productivity implies considerable repercussions.

This fact should be present in the elements that merit the elaboration of the indicators and methodologies set to estimate the tangible costs of drug consumption.

2. The familial ties are of the utmost importance for this population, and in 95% of the cases they maintain active ties.

This situation has important implications in the approach and intervention of the associated problems, given that they should be considered with the purpose of indicating in what way they can affect the conflicts that the condition of being imprisoned generates on the nuclear family and the impact that these have, as much for tangible costs as for the intangible ones.

3. In Costa Rica, 33% of the imprisoned population acquires this condition due to crimes against the Psychotropic Law. It is important to mention that the consumption of drugs in our country is not a crime.
4. In spite of the above, according to the opinions of those interviewed, it was determined that a crime-drug link exists in 2/3 of the committed crimes by the studied population; the crime of drug trafficking became the most important (37.6%).
5. This information induces us to think that the narcoactivity presents itself as an attractive income-producing economic possibility for the acquisition of goods and services or else, of status, tied to the patterns of operating consumerism in today's society, but with evident danger and at great risk.

This issue is a wake-up call to authorities in seeing the need to explore more fully the issue with the purpose of offering integrated answers to this national reality.

6. With respect to age of the first criminal conduct, 10% of the imprisoned population involved in this type of conduct was 15 years old, and at 18 years old, 30% had done it, an important condition for the implementation of the required preventative and intervening actions.
7. The three principal consumed drugs in penitentiary areas are tobacco, marijuana and crack, which is in accordance with the perception that the meta-population has, with respect to drugs consumed among their fellow inmates.

Said information, with the exception of tobacco, indicates that the tendency to consume among imprisoned people centers on illegal drugs, an issue that contrasts with the tendency of the general population.

8. Alcohol had a negative relationship of consumption. The general population's active consumption is greater, even though the general perception overvalues the imprisoned population's consumption.

For this finding there is no immediate explanation, but without doubt, there are some factors that oblige us to delve into them in this study.

9. In spite of the controls and security measures inside the prisons, the availability of drugs in the penitentiary systems is very high, and according to the studied population's opinion, an important relationship exists between the violence in the prison environment and the consumption of drugs.
10. With a basis in the studied population's opinion (84%), it was determined that being a consumer prior to imprisonment is a principal justifying factor for substance consumption in the prison area. That is, substance consumption outside translates to the penitentiary area with its respective characteristics.



Consumption prevention in the prison centers is something that transcends the Penitentiary System considering the characteristics of formation and socialization of this high-risk group.

11. In terms of initiation into substance consumption and in what concerns the three aforementioned principal drugs, it was established that this initiation gave the range of thirteen years of age and less, indicating that this population tends to be in contact with drugs at early ages, an obligatory consideration in the design of respective prevention programs.
12. Moreover, it was established that the greater the addictive power of a substance, the greater the relationship between committing crimes while under the effects of the drug, or rather with actions to obtain said substances, as the cocaine case demonstrated in its different forms of consumption.
13. With respect to the impact that being a prisoner has, the three environments reported as most affected were the familial, economic and moral, although in a different order of importance.

From an individual perspective, the prisoners considered their condition to affect them mostly due to the rupture of familial ties and the lost opportunity of providing the economic sustenance for their dependents.

With respect to the family's perspective, the impact is due to the instability and familial suffering due to the situation, in terms of morale, stigmatization and loss of social status, and economically, in lowered personal resources.

14. In reference to the options to confront the problem of consumption in prison areas, the opinion of the goal population was divided into three big categories:
  - The reinforcement and improvement of vigilance activities
  - The strengthening and fostering of self-help groups and of therapeutic intervention
  - Improving and expanding opportunities for the utilization of free time

In terms of the principal conclusions for the differences found according to sex, the following was obtained:

1. In general terms for the studied population, drug consumption begins at an early age, although women tend to start earlier, predominantly in the consumption of cocaine, alcohol, marijuana and less markedly for tobacco.
2. In spite of the criminal behavior starting earlier among men than among women, the interesting aspect of this situation is that apparently, at early ages, consumption does not induce the commission of a crime, in view of the fact that women start earlier in the

consumption, but later in the delinquent activity. This causes us to think about various factors that can explain the situation:

- a. That at early ages, what is present is an initial consumption and not an abusive or dependent consumption that engenders criminal acts.
- b. Although women began using drugs earlier, the acquisition of drugs is easier for women; however, this consumption may be a component of sexual exploitation. In any case, at first, it does not necessarily submit them to committing crimes in order to obtain the drugs they consume.
- c. Criminality, as a behavior tied to the socialization process, occurs earlier in men and is tied to drug consumption, whether as a product or an effect of delinquency.

These are issues that require deeper analysis through complementary methodologies, such as qualitative analysis.

3. In larger numbers, women commit crimes tied to drug trafficking or sales: 60% versus 24% of men.

This permits the inference that in Costa Rica, with the dominant socioeconomic reality, in which more than 50% of the families have a woman as head-of-household, drug trafficking and/or sales results being a viable form of confronting their obligations and responsibilities, without measuring the risks that this implies.

4. Finally, in relation to the perception of the impact, the family is the most affected, regardless of sex, according to our observations, which are described in the general section of this article.

The last two aspects are key elements regarding the estimation of costs tied to the topic of drugs, which demand a greater and more profound analysis.