

Drugs and violence: social perception in a community

Drogas e violência: percepção social em uma comunidade

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ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional, descriptive study aimed at investigating social perception on street drugs and violence in a community in northwestern Paraná. A structured questionnaire was applied to 358 inhabitants, of whom 98.6% reported to perceive the presence of drugs in high intensity (82.4%), a situation considered as “alarming” for 56.1% and a cause of suffering for 61.5%. Seventy-eight interviewees (22.1%) reported that the presence of drugs caused changes in family life (22.1%), social life (29.5%), and in family behavior (24.9%). A total of 72.6% reported restrictions in their activities due to fear of violence. The main reason for drug use and distribution was related to the absence of policing (31.4%). Most people (90.2%) perceived the presence of violence; 93.8% related this presence to drug abuse. The presence of violence was mostly related to drug abuse, as a result of the absence of policing and drug traffic fighting in the community.

Descriptors: Street Drugs; Violence; Social Perception; Psychiatric Nursing; Public Health Nursing.

RESUMO

Objetivou-se investigar a percepção social sobre drogas de abuso e violência em uma comunidade do Noroeste do Paraná. Pesquisa transversal, descritiva, utilizando questionário estruturado, aplicado a 358 moradores. Dos 358 entrevistados, 98,6% referiram que percebem a presença de drogas em elevada intensidade (82,4%), situação considerada “preocupante” para 56,1% e motivo de sofrimento para 61,5%. Setenta e oito entrevistados (22,1%) informaram que a presença de drogas causou alteração em sua vida familiar (22,1%) e social (29,5%) e no comportamento familiar (24,9%), e 72,6% apontaram restrições em suas atividades pelo medo de sofrer violências. O principal motivo da circulação e consumo de drogas foi relacionado à ausência de policiamento (31,4%). A maioria (90,2%) percebe a presença de violência e destes 93,8% a relacionaram com o uso de drogas. A presença de violência foi majoritariamente relacionada ao uso de drogas, e ocorre devido à ausência de policiamento e combate ao tráfico na comunidade.

Descritores: Drogas Ilícitas; Violência; Percepção Social; Enfermagem Psiquiátrica; Enfermagem em Saúde Pública.

INTRODUCTION

Street drugs are substances that alter one or more functions of the body once they enter it. Their use has been increasing since the 1990s and the consequences for individuals and society are deemed as a public health and social problem in Brazil and worldwide. The World Drug Report published in 2011 reveals that the number of users of these substances increased from 180 million people in 2009 to 210 million people in 2010⁽¹⁻²⁾.

Increased drug use and consequently increased commercialization and/or illegal trade exposed community residents to the consequences of this context marked by social, economic, legal, and health problems involving violence and criminality, problems at work, and breakdown of families. Some communities are more exposed to street drugs and their impact, intensifying the perception and discussions on the existing social problems and the impact of drugs on the quality of life and health of the population⁽³⁻⁶⁾.

A study conducted in cities of the state of Paraná found that due to the increased violence rates over the last two decades the inhabitants of the area believe that violence is closer to their everyday lives. Seven out of ten people feel less safe today in comparison to five years ago. The sense of threat is backed by statistics published by the regional print media, which point out increasing crime rates in the state over the years⁽⁷⁾.

High homicide rates related to drug use and trade represent the tip of the iceberg of social violence. The perception of violence results from the recurrent exposure to violent images in the media and the witnessing of violence within the community, which strengthens the belief that violence is the natural and legitimate outcome for many social conflicts⁽⁸⁾.

The population receives information about violence related to drug trade/dealing and the dangers of drug abuse; on the other hand, they are exposed to sophisticated advertisements encouraging the use of alcohol and tobacco, which has been pointed out as precursors of the use of illicit drugs⁽⁹⁾. Given this

information ambiguity, the recognition of the social perception on the context involving street drug abuse and the influence of violence on the lives of people in the community becomes an important tool for the development of strategies to cope with this phenomenon⁽¹⁰⁻¹¹⁾.

Therefore, the present study aimed at investigating the social perception on street drug abuse and violence in a community.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A quantitative, descriptive, and cross-sectional study was conducted using a population-based household survey, in a city in the northwestern region of the state of Paraná. The study location site of this research was a housing complex built in the 1990s for low-income families whose heads of household were unemployed or had an income below the minimum wage at the time, and whose families consisted of five members, with or without blood ties.

Random probability sampling representing the 5,140 inhabitants was applied to establish the number of subjects with a level of confidence of 95%, sampling error of 0.05 and p value of 0.10. A population sample of 358 individuals resulted from this process; one resident aged 18 years or older was interviewed in each household. A reference system with in loco visits to the community was created using a three-stage system – random blocks, random households, and random respondents present at the household when the interviewer arrived.

The structured questionnaire included questions related to the socioeconomic profile of the interviewees and the perception on the presence of street drugs in the community and the consequences in the lives of the interviewees and their families. This questionnaire was developed based on the Social Perception Indicators System (SIPS - *Sistema de Indicadores de Percepção Social*) of the Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA - *Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada*)⁽¹⁰⁾. The SIPS consists of a household survey conducted with

Brazilian families aiming at understanding the social perception of the population on public goods and services offered in several areas and supporting analyses and decisions on the development, implementation and assessment of public policies⁽¹⁰⁾.

Data collection was conducted between May and June 2012. Data were compiled in a spreadsheet and data processing and analysis were performed in specific software. Statistical analysis consisted in describing the data through simple descriptive analysis (absolute/relative frequency and calculation of means).

The research project was submitted and approved (6799/2012) by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Maringá. The individuals only participated in the research once they had signed a free and informed consent form.

RESULTS

Characterization of the study participants

The mean age of the interviewees was 43.9 ± 15 years. Most were female (68.2%) and had between 9 and 11 years of schooling, that is, up to middle school (36.3%).

The mean family income of the interviewees was R\$1,602.00, ranging between R\$70.00 and R\$10,000.00, considering the current minimum wage of R\$622.00. A total of 163 interviewees (45.5%) reported having a family income below two minimum wages (R\$1,244.00). Most of them (53.6%) reported to be employed or developing independent activities as an income source, although unemployment was reported by 12.9%.

Of the 244 interviewed women, 29.9% reported to be housewives, that is, they worked exclusively for their own families, having no paid work. Women represented 78.3% of the 46 unemployed individuals, as 36 women reported to be unemployed.

The mean time of residence in the community was 14.3 ± 5 , ranging between 6 months and 20 years. Most of the residents (89.1) lived in a permanent neighborhood for more than 6 years.

Social perception of the presence of street drugs and violence in the community

Of the 358 interviewees, 98.6% reported to perceive the presence of street drugs in the community in distinct levels of intensity. Most of these reported to perceive the existence of drugs in high intensity (81.3%); 13.1% reported moderate intensity, 2.8% reported low intensity, and only 10 respondents (2.8%) reported not knowing the intensity of the presence of drugs and the perception of absence of street drugs in the community.

When questioned about changes in family and social life and the influence on everyday life caused by the presence of street drugs in the community, 56.1% of the interviewed residents reported that this presence was deemed "disturbing", representing a cause of suffering for 61.5% (Table 1).

The presence of street drugs in the community interfered with family (22.1%) and social (29.5%) life as well as with family behavior (24.9%) of the interviewees (Table 1).

Although the perception of the presence of drugs in the community was deemed as having low intensity by 15 interviewees (4.2%), five of them reported that the presence of drugs in the community was "disturbing", and eight residents reported that such presence caused suffering (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of interviewed residents according to the perception on the presence of drugs in the community and the consequences in the lives of the interviewees and their families. Maringá, PR, Brazil, 2012.

Intensity of the presence of drugs	High/Moderate (n=338)		Low/Does not know (n=15)		Total (n=353)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Consequences¹						
Discomfort						
Yes	193	57.1	5	33.3	198	56.1
No	145	42.9	10	66.7	155	43.9
Suffering²						
Yes	209	61.8	8	53.3	217	61.5
No	129	38.2	7	46.7	136	38.5
Interference in family life³						
Yes	77	22.8	1	6.7	78	22.1
No	261	77.2	14	93.3	275	77.9
Interference in social life⁴						
Yes	102	30.2	2	13.3	104	29.5
No	236	69.8	13	86.7	249	70.5
Changes in the family dynamics⁵						
Yes	87	25.7	1	6.7	88	24.9
No	251	74.3	14	93.3	265	75.1

¹ Refers to closed-ended questions made to the interviewees with two options of answers: yes or no.

² Interviewees reported discomfort or unhappiness due to the presence of drugs in the community.

³ Changes in family relationships among family members.

⁴ Interruption of social activities, such as leaving home, talking with neighbors, going to the grocery in the community.

⁵ Changes in family dynamics, such as failing to have leisure activities or other family activities.

In relation to the use of drugs and violence, most residents (90.2%) reported to perceive the presence of violence in the community. Of these, 93.8% related it to the presence of street drugs.

Of the 358 interviewees, 8.7% had suffered violence in the community; women represented 74.2% of such respondents. Among the types of violence reported by the interviewees, physical aggression (38.7%) and robbery (35.5%) represented the most reported types of violence, although verbal threats (19.4%) and attempted murders (6.4%) were also mentioned.

Fear of suffering violence in the community was reported by 79.6%, including robbery (33.8%), stray bullets (17.0%), murder (15.9%), physical aggression (10.9%), and sexual violence (2.0%).

When questioned about daily activities, 72.6% reported to avoid activities such as arriving or leaving home at night (58.5%), leaving home at any time of the day (30.0%), going to parties and pubs in the community (2.7%), and talking to drug users (8.8%).

DISCUSSION

The profile of the interviewees corresponds to young adult women at working age having studied up to middle school following major sociodemographic characteristics in the Brazilian population⁽¹²⁻¹⁴⁾.

The mean family income of the interviewees was lower than the mean household monthly income of the Brazilian population (currently R\$2,419.00). The percentage of respondents that had paid jobs in formal or informal sectors was also lower than that found for the Brazilian population (54.2%). For the women, the percentage of interviewees that reported to be unemployed (78.3%) was higher than that found for the Brazilian female population (59%)⁽¹⁵⁾.

The mean time of residence in the community was 14.3 years, indicating the existence of ties of the interviewees with their neighborhood and the social apparatus. This might ensure a higher reliability of the answers. However, the long period of acquiescence with situations of violence may lead to a banalization of this problem in the community.

The results of the present study point out a high social perception of the presence of drugs in the community,

although with different levels of intensity. Most respondents reported to perceive the presence of drugs in the community with moderate to high intensity, indicating a strong circulation and use of street drugs in the neighborhood.

A study conducted using registration forms of families used by the teams of the Family Health Program in the region of the community pointed out drug abuse in daily life. Alcohol and tobacco occupied the third and fourth spots, respectively, among the most recurrent problems, thus confirming the strong presence of street drug abuse in the studied community⁽¹⁶⁾.

It is noteworthy that the strong presence of street drugs in this community negatively affected the lives of most interviewed residents. They were found to be worried about the presence of street drugs as this fact represents a cause of suffering. Furthermore, the results of the study showed that although the respondents pointed out low-intensity presence of street drugs in the community, they reported the same influence of such drugs in their lives.

Preoccupation and suffering caused by this presence may be a consequence of the daily living or observation of people using drugs as well as experiencing the negative effects of such use. It is important to mention that the concept of suffering derived from subjective assumptions; the interviewees provided their answers according to their perception on this term. It is known that the presence of street drugs generates devastating consequences for the user, family, and community where the individual is inserted, usually causing changes in the communities and family behavior⁽³⁻⁴⁾. However, it was observed that in this situation considered by them as disturbing, in general the interviewees did not change their family and social lives or the family behavior due to the presence of street drugs in the community. In turn, those who reported influence of street drugs on their daily lives reported more significant changes in relation to social living in the community.

According to the respondents, the lack of policing as public safety apparatus was the most mentioned reason for the intense circulation and use of drugs in the community. The family component and social determinants were also mentioned as reasons for the circulation and use of drugs.

The presence of drugs in the community is associated with the absence of public policies to combat drug use and to unfavorable socioeconomic factors, such as inadequate housing, low educational level, unemployment, and poverty – factors present in the studied community⁽¹⁷⁾. Impoverishment of families represents an additional risk as the loss of consumption capacity may lead young people to criminality and drug use, considering that illegal drug trade represents an income source in which violence is usually adopted to resolve conflicts and expand the participation in the market⁽¹⁸⁻¹⁹⁾.

Access to firearms and the restriction of internal rules to the “communities” facilitates the association of illegal drug trade activities with other types of crimes, such as theft, robbery, and kidnapping, in order to expand the potential income of criminals. The raised money ensures immediate enjoyment of basic goods to the “social” life of young suburban individuals: sophisticated shoes/sneakers, high-end mobile phones, branded clothes, and possibly motorcycles and cars with shining accessories and sound systems⁽²⁰⁾.

Regarding the relation between drug use and violence, the interviewees also reported an intense presence of violence in the community. This result confirms the research conducted by the Paraná Research Institute in the state of Paraná, which also identified the perception of violence in the communities associated with the use of street drugs; 47% of the 1,505 interviewees reported the use of street drugs as the most important factor related to violence⁽⁷⁾.

In Brazil, violence and traumatic injuries represent predominant causes of morbidity and mortality of the population since the decade of 1980; by 2007 they

represented 12.5% of the deaths, particularly among young men (83.5%). The pattern of occurrence of trauma in Brazil is not different from other Latin American countries, as most deaths are caused by homicides or related to traffic collisions⁽²¹⁾.

The association between alcohol and other drugs and increased urban violence is reported as a causal factor of trauma from accidents and aggression, as street drug users present impulsive and risk-taking behaviors that, in combination with a violent environment, increase the probability of experiencing or witnessing traumatic events⁽²¹⁾.

When questioned if they were victims of violence in the community, 8.7% of the respondents answered affirmatively; most victims of such violence were women. Physical aggression was the most reported type of violence. In Brazil, data collected by the Notifiable Diseases Information System (SINAN) of the Ministry of Health reveals that most victims of violence in the country consists of women, and physical aggression is emphasized among the main types of violence, with 78.2% of the cases, similarly to data found in the studied community⁽²²⁾.

According to results found in the studied community, the presence of violence in the community generates a sense of insecurity and fear in the individuals who live in this context. In communities with intense cultural pressure to keep drug use and trade swept under the carpet or simply accept it as "natural", small acts of violence are unlikely to be fully reported. The victims may be reluctant to discuss violent experiences not only for shame or taboo, but also because of fear⁽²⁰⁾.

Fear of dying was often reported by the interviewees, expressed by the types of violence related to "stray bullet" and attempted murder. The results of the SIPS 2012 also pointed out this typology of violence indicating that 62.3% of the 2,888 interviewees reported to fear being victims of armed robbery and attempted murder (62.4%)⁽¹⁰⁾.

The population is often exposed to negative impacts of violence both in the community and through the media, which has been emphasizing the magnitude of the impact of violence on individuals and society. The several forms of violence – murders, gunfire, kidnappings, violence against children and young people – gain visibility and dissemination in the media. Such exposure of the individual to violence in the media may generate a sense of fear of being a victim of violence⁽²³⁾. The interviewees reported that the fear of robbery, fear of stray bullets and attempted murder may be a result of the exposure to violence in the community; on the other hand, these fears may result from the frequent exposure to violence from information provided by the media that are accessible to the society.

Even with a high level of subjectivity, fear is an indicator that affects the quality of life of the population influenced by the perception of the level of threat that such violence occurs in fact⁽¹⁰⁾. Thus, the impact of violence usually presents negative effects in their development, particularly for young people. For adult and elderly individuals it causes behavioral changes as well as changes in lifestyle⁽²⁴⁾.

The results of the study also showed that when questioned if they had suffered changes in their family and social life or in the family behavior as a result of the presence of street drugs in the community, most interviewees answered negatively. However, when questioned about the activities that they avoid due to fear of violence in the community, most respondents reported to avoid performing some activities in the community, especially leaving home at night; and some respondents reported to avoid leaving home at any time. Such situation indicates that the residents did not change their lives as a result of drug abuse; they changed their lives because of the violence related to such use.

The results of the study in the community corroborate the results found in a study conducted by the Paraná Research Institute and published in regional print media. In the state of Paraná, seven out of ten people feel

less safe today in comparison to 5 years ago. The most avoided activity in the community because of fear of violence was walking in dark streets, represented by 25% of the 1,505 interviewees⁽⁷⁾.

Given this information, it is possible to conclude that the circulation and use of street drugs are present in the studied community and in other communities in the state. Moreover, the presence of drugs causes changes in the lifestyle, but violence is the triggering factor of changes in the everyday life of the interviewees.

CONCLUSION

The results point out that the high presence of drugs in the community has negative impacts on the life of residents, leading them to confinement as a result of fear of violence and restrictions on work for women that quit their jobs to take care of the household, and reduced everyday activities that demand displacement of the residents through the streets, especially at night.

The absence of policing and illegal trade fighting in the community was considered the reason for the intense

circulation and use of street drugs, and the presence of violence in the community was mainly related to the use of drugs.

Although the study was conducted in a community with a high perception of drug use and violence, it is not possible to conclude that the results are representative of other communities in the state of Paraná and in Brazil, as social perception is affected by local culture and subjectivity of the individuals. However, it reinforces the negative influence of drug use and violence in the lives of individuals as well as the need for further studies addressing the impacts of drug use on families and society.

In addition, it is necessary that health professionals develop strategies to prevent drug use and to empower the population to live in the context of street drugs and violence. Nursing professionals are key players in this process as they have more contact with the community, facilitating the identification of problems and the approach to the theme.

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