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Switzerland's crack epidemic causes shock

Since 2022, Switzerland has experienced a flood of concentrated and cheap cocaine. Part of this product is sold as crack. People can be seen openly taking drugs in several cantons. Geneva is the hardest hit.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

Thirty years after the closure of Platzspitz and Letten, where Zurich's heroin addicts used to indulge their habit in the open, hard drug users have reemerged in public view. "You can see them in the large cities, but also in Vevey, Biel, Solothurn, Brugg and even Chur," observes Frank Zobel, deputy director at Addiction Switzerland. There is a park in the Grisons capital where drug users congregate, as they do in the Bäckeranlage park in central Zurich. Geneva's crack addicts normally gravitate to the area around Cornavin station. This time cocaine is driving consumption. The white powder is flooding European cities and supplanting heroin. The drug is cheap, with a purity sometimes exceeding 70 percent.

"We've never seen this before," comments Zobel, author of a report on the crack wave engulfing Geneva. The cocaine-based product is smoked with a glass pipe and gives a powerful high. So, it isn't long before the addict is ready for the next hit. Although the drug has been consumed in Switzerland for years, its availability has exploded. "Supply has doubled within a year, which has created demand," concludes Nicolas Dietrich, cantonal commissioner for addiction-related issues in Fribourg.

Ready-made crack

The explosion in crack consumption is particularly high in Geneva, where it is sold ready for consumption by dealers of African origin coming from France. The "modous", as small-scale suppliers are known in Wolof, a west African language, have established a market based on selling small quantities at cheap prices. Crack users once bought cocaine in the street and



Small amounts ready for consumption and sold at discount prices have made demand for crack soar in Geneva.
Photo: Nils Ackermann, Lundi13

bicarbonate of soda at Migros, before cooking the drug at home. The discounted crack has increased the pace of consumption. Every day, dozens of smokers gather around Quai 9, a secure centre for addicts in Geneva beside Cornavin station. "One third are from Geneva, one third from France and one third are migrants," estimates Camille Robert, co-director of local addiction study group Groupe ment romand d'étude des addictions.

In June, Première ligne, the association in charge of Quai 9, closed its doors for a week due to the aggressive behaviour of crack users and brawls breaking out in front of the centre. "Colleagues were being caught up in disputes on the premises," says Thomas Herquel, director of the association. Since then, the smoking room has been out of bounds to crack users, except for those who come to sleep in one of the 12 camp beds at Quai 9. This came as a shock, acknowledges Pascal Dupont, manager of Entracte, a daycare centre for drug addicts in Geneva.

This epidemic is shaking the foundations of the support structures. "Crack is like a series of explosions going off in quick succession. The users tend to be vulnerable and prone to depression, so it's all about the here and now; they have no perspective of time," comments Gérald Thévoz, psychosocial counsellor and addiction expert. Users stop eating, drinking and even sleeping. "The drugs basically detach people from their social network," says Thévoz. Their condition shocks people and they lose touch with their friends and acquaintances.

"My initial aim is for the users who visit Entracte to come back," states Pascal Dupont. He has seen some of his regulars cut their ties with the centre. Sometimes it takes a hospital visit before they start to think about getting off the drugs.

Medicine in Fribourg

To combat the crisis, the cantonal government of Geneva has approved a programme costing six million Swiss francs, mainly to finance an enhanced police presence. Quai 9 will be expanded and have more staff. Users will have more night shelters to choose from. The idea is to offer addicts, some of whom receive no social welfare, places where they can have a break. Some of these people have no access to social welfare, such as users from France or the homeless in Geneva, who include those from a migration background.

Elsewhere in Switzerland, crack is usually cooked by the user and sometimes a portion of it is sold on. "You can find cocaine anywhere," comments Frank Zobel. "The drug scenes vary in line with social and geographic factors," adds Nicolas Cloux,



manager of the foundation that supports drug addicts in Tremplin, Fribourg. Psychotropic drug users take more medicine there than elsewhere. "If ready-made crack comes here, we will apply the lessons learned in Geneva," remarks Nicolas Dietrich, Fribourg commissioner for addictions. The canton has already witnessed the early stages of the drug and has set up a dedicated working group in response.

Cocaine: a reaction to living on the edge?

The popularity of crack in Switzerland may be partly due to precarious circumstances. "Switzerland has reached a nadir in the deterioration of its social and economic conditions," believes Hervé Durgnat, member of a cantonal commission of addiction experts in the canton of Vaud. Experts were surprised that crack was being used in Switzerland's streets. "We found it incongruous that people would consume crack so openly in a rich country like Switzerland," says Durgnat. Some of the people are already familiar with the drug or are on replacement medication and susceptible to relapse. "We take in people who may be close to retirement, are often ill and sometimes live in hotel

Thomas Herquel of Première ligne in his clinical-looking premises, Quai 9 in Geneva. Addicts sometimes behave aggressively, says Herquel.
Photo: Nils Ackermann, Lundi13

accommodation. What prospects have they got?" asks Pascal Dupont rhetorically. In Geneva, the Quai 9 social workers bring bottles of water and food to the exhausted users taken in from the street. Emergency shelters offer respite and there are places that will take in crack users regardless of their condition, but the usual thresholds – minimum stay for example – are sometimes too high for these unstable people. "Policy-makers don't want to make the situation

Overt addiction: crack addicts are becoming conspicuous, especially in the cities. A photo from Geneva.
Photo: Nils Ackermann, Lundi13



look bad, but we also need to consider the right medical and psycho-social approach to help these persons," emphasises Gérald Thévoz referring to a heroin-based medical treatment. The authorities in Zurich, Berne and Lausanne are also looking into the regulated sale of cocaine.

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addiction expert in the canton of Vaud