

## Canadian and Brazilian researchers join forces to combat crack use



*Dr. Francisco Bastos together with members of his research group (including PhD student Neilane Bertoni, middle) at the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation in Rio de Janeiro.*

**By Rosanna Tamburri**

The use of crack cocaine has reached epidemic proportions in Brazil with an estimated one million users in the country. These are among the most marginalized of citizens – homeless, poverty-stricken with a host of associated health problems and often victims of violent crime.

A group of researchers from Canada and Brazil, with funding assistance from the Canada-Latin America and the Caribbean Research Exchange Grants (LACREG) program, have joined forces to analyze data and develop effective prevention and treatment programs.

“A lot of people suggest that Brazil is now the nation with the largest crack-user population,” said Benedikt Fischer, director of the Centre for Applied Research in Mental Health and Addictions at the Simon Fraser University. Crack is the most widely used illegal drug in Brazil because of its low price and the country’s proximity to areas where it is produced.

The \$15,000 LACREG grant allowed Dr. Fischer and his Brazilian and Canadian counterparts to analyze data from a previously conducted survey of 160 young crack users in Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, a city in Brazil’s northeast. “We learned a lot by comparing and contrasting two different places,” said Francisco Inacio Bastos, senior researcher at Rio’s Oswaldo Cruz Foundation, who collaborated with Dr. Fischer on the project.

In Rio and other large Brazilian cities poor neighbourhoods have been overtaken by large numbers of crack users and dealers, often hundreds of people who live on the streets. These so-called “Cracolândias” are crime-ridden enclaves, an urban blight that often make international headlines. Salvador, by contrast, has fewer users who are more dispersed, an important distinction when implementing prevention and treatment

policies, Dr. Bastos explained. The researchers found differences in how crack is used in the two regions and the additives used to mix the drug, he said. The study is also one of the few to compare the characteristics of male and female users. “Women are especially vulnerable,” Dr. Bastos said. Most are involved in the sex trade and are often targets of physical and sexual violence.

Effective treatment programs remain elusive as users are often homeless or transient and difficult to reach. It also takes time to gain their trust, Dr. Bastos said. The level of violence among the drug factions is another factor. Brazil reports some 48,000 homicides a year, many of them related to the crack trade.

The data analysis resulted in several academic papers that were published in peer-reviewed journals. Other researchers involved were Marcelo Santos Cruz, coordinator of the Drug Abuse Research and Assistance Program at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, Tarcisio Andrade of the Faculty of Medicine at the Federal University of Bahia, and several other Canadian and Brazilian collaborators and graduate students.

The findings were also used to develop a funding proposal submitted to the Brazilian government for a major new research centre in Rio. The centre will develop and implement evidence-based prevention and treatment programs in collaboration with Brazilian community groups and other agencies. “This will be a landmark research endeavour when it comes to fruition,” said Dr. Fischer.

The LACREG program is managed by Universities Canada on behalf of the International Development Research Centre. It supports collaborative projects by researchers in Canada and the Caribbean or Latin America.

Dr. Bastos said the LACREG funds were instrumental for conducting the data analysis and preparing the funding proposal. But they also allowed researchers from two diverse cultures to share their expertise and experiences, he added. “This is very helpful for both sides.”



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