

# Solvent inhalants use in the San Judas Tadeo feast

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Original article

## ABSTRACT

### Introduction

San Judas Tadeo is the patron saint of the difficult and desperate causes. Among popular beliefs, it is supposed that street kids pray to him and that he helps them quit the use of drugs.

### Objective

Understanding the phenomenon of the misuse of solvents in the context of the San Judas Tadeo festivity among street children living in the Historical Center zone of Mexico City.

### Method

The "Meeting places" methodology developed by Hughes and adapted by Ortiz was applied from 2011 to 2014. Non-participant and participant observations, as well as unstructured and structured interviews to key informants were conducted.

### Results

Twenty-two festivities of San Judas Tadeo were documented, and more than 300 solvent users were interviewed. The average age was 25 years. They were unemployed and begged for money. All of them were *activo* users which they administered with *monas*. They usually did it in binge patterns: use – non use, high – low use.

### Discussion and conclusion

The link between the consumption of inhalants and the cult of St. Jude in children living in the streets is fictitious.

**Key words:** Street kids, solvent, inhalant, San Judas Tadeo.

## RESUMEN

### Introducción

A San Judas Tadeo se le considera en México el patrón de las causas difíciles y desesperadas. Entre las creencias populares, se piensa que los "niños en situación de calle" se acogen a él para que les proteja y ayude a dejar de consumir drogas.

### Objetivo

Conocer el espacio social del uso de solventes inhalables en el marco del culto a San Judas Tadeo, a partir las prácticas y experiencias vividas con los niños en situación de calle de la zona del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México.

### Método

Se aplicó la metodología conocida como "Lugares de Reunión" propuesta por Hughes y adaptada por Ortiz, en un periodo de trabajo que abarcó del año 2011 a inicios del 2014. Se utilizó la observación no participante y la participante, así como la entrevista no estructurada a informantes no calificados, a calificados y a clave.

### Resultados

Se documentaron 22 celebraciones del día de San Judas incluyendo dos fiestas anuales. Se entrevistaron a más de 300 usuarios de solventes inhalables y los resultados mostraron, entre otras cosas, que la edad promedio es de 25 años, que se desempeñan en subocupaciones informales y a la mendicidad en la vía pública. Todos consumen *activo*, pero con diferencias en la intensidad, con periodos alternantes de consumos altos y bajos y consideran que es prácticamente imposible dejar de consumirlo.

### Discusión y conclusión

El vínculo entre el consumo de inhalables y el culto a San Judas Tadeo en los niños en situación de calle, es ficticio.

**Palabras clave:** Niños en situación de calle, solventes inhalables, San Judas Tadeo.

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## INTRODUCTION

The consumption of inhalable solvent substances in the population of adolescents and young people is a public health priority in Mexico City.<sup>1</sup>

Research into the phenomenon of "street children" in Mexico has historically been carried out by the Ramón de la Fuente Muñiz National Institute of Psychiatry. Primary lines of approach have been on psychological, social, and neuropsychological aspects.<sup>2-14</sup>

The prevalence of solvent consumption "at some point during their lifetime" in the general population (12-65 years of age) has shown an increase in the previous three applications of the National Addictions Survey: 0.4% in 2002, 0.7% in 2008, and 0.9% in 2011. According to the same survey, some 77.0% of inhalant users start consuming at 17 years of age or less.<sup>15</sup>

This figure is reinforced by information from the Drugs Information Reporting System, whose last report states that justice and healthcare institutions in Mexico City recorded some 5.1% of users starting before the age of 11. The age group most affected is that between 15 and 19: 44.1%, followed by 40.2% in the group aged 12 to 14.<sup>16</sup>

According to the System for Epidemiological Surveillance on Addiction,<sup>17</sup> 8.5% of the population in non-governmental treatment and rehabilitation centers are patients treated for inhalant abuse, meaning that the care needs related to this type of consumption are third among the most widely-used drugs. The high relative frequency of women who use inhalants as an impact drug is notable: 12.6%, compared to 7.7% in men.<sup>17</sup>

According to this source, the use of inhalable solvents is primarily associated with marginalized populations, and since the 1960s it has been considered a "poverty drug". However, inhalant consumption in Mexico City is currently present both in contexts of children and young people living on the streets, and in junior high and high school students who belong to a low-middle socio-economic level.<sup>18</sup> It is also associated with other social and cultural phenomena, such as the San Judas Tadeo Cult and the "reggaeton" and "perreo" styles of music\*.

In this context, consumption of inhalable solvents by children, young people, and adults living on the streets takes place around the church of San Hipólito within the Historic Center of Mexico City. This group is known as "street kids".\*\* They are children in the emotional sense of the word: although they may appear to be adults in terms of age, they are still not in the psychic sense of the word.<sup>6</sup>

San Judas Tadeo is an image in popular religiosity considered to be the patron saint of difficult and desperate

causes. In recent years, the cult has been associated with marginal, minority, and stigmatized populations: "addicts", prostitutes, criminals, and "street children" who inhale solvents.

The most important celebration in San Judas Tadeo takes place on October 28 each year, in the church of San Hipólito in the Historic Center of Mexico City. It celebrates the largest and most representative ritual in the country, in terms of the number of congregants to which it applies.

It is a phenomenon full of symbols; it has various manifestations which change with the times, for example, the incorporation of adolescents into the cult of San Judas Tadeo has come about in recent years, although it is not known exactly when the younger population in general, and solvent users in particular, became attracted by the cult of the so-called saint of difficult causes.<sup>19,20</sup>

To understand the socio-cultural aspects of the use of the solvent *activo*\* linked to following the cult, in-depth ethnographic work is required, which would make it possible to describe and interpret the phenomenon from within. This is the methodological focus which was proposed to understand what San Judas Tadeo signifies in the phenomenon of solvent drug use.

The festivities which take place every month and especially on October 28 also attract children living on the street, and their presence in such spaces has produced the false idea in the popular imagination of a direct link between the cult of San Judas Tadeo and the consumption of inhalable solvents. However, this association is not that simple; the presence of street children in San Hipólito has other explanations which go beyond the cult.

The present work is written from an anthropological and psychosocial perspective, which does not take this association as a given, but which instead seeks to explore the substance-San Judas Tadeo relationship in more depth.

As Gigengack,<sup>21</sup> Brady,<sup>22</sup> and MacLean<sup>23,24</sup> have previously indicated in this sense, anthropology is one of the disciplines that has most enriched the landscape that exists behind substance abuse by groups of people who live on the streets in an environment of poverty and marginalization.

## OBJECTIVE

To understand the social space of solvent use within the framework of the San Judas Tadeo cult, starting from practices and lived experiences with street children in the Historic Center of Mexico City.

\* A dance in which couples mimic "doggy-style" copulation.

\*\* The term is used to describe children who live on the streets of a city, deprived of family care and the protection of an adult.

\* This is an industrial solvent, the primary base of which is toluene. It is a product made for industrial use, easy to access, and sold commercially in hardware stores and auto shops.

## METHOD

The method known as "Meeting Places" proposed by Hughes was adapted and applied in the area surrounding the church of San Hipólito in the Historic Center of Mexico City. With this method, interventions which are given in parallel while the research is carried out are useful to contact drug users, and serve to prevent other problems associated with drug consumption, such as sexually transmitted infections, overdose, or even to direct them to treatment and reinforce retention.<sup>3,25</sup>

The work period spanned from mid-2011 to early 2014. During this time, social mapping was used to recognize and describe the area, using non-participant and participant observation, in order to understand the dynamic of the area during various times and days of the week.

The study zone was marked out, and general aspects were noted about the times and ways in which people bought, sold, and took solvents. The geographical points where activities and paraphernalia\* related to substance use took place were also marked out.<sup>3,26-28</sup>

Access was sought to non-qualified and qualified informants. The former are people who move through the area and who have knowledge of the activities, practices, and times. The latter are people who, due to their formal role in the area, have a greater likelihood of understanding solvent use in the population and its association with San Judas Tadeo: priests, street sellers, police officers, and shopkeepers,\*\* among others.

The process of immersion into the community implied the researcher living there, which included and required sensitivity, judgment, and skill in order to generate the initial approaches which would later make possible further contact with them.

Name, nicknames, sex, age, education, occupation, consumption patterns, and the way the drug was obtained were all recorded, as well as working and criminal activities, alliances, and relationships with others, rivalries, and the participants' knowledge, attitudes, and practices in terms of San Judas Tadeo.

## RESULTS

Records were made of 22 celebrations on the Day of San Judas, held on the 28th of every month. Two of these corresponded with the annual festivals during October. Some 17 groups of street children were identified living in the area, and around 300 individuals were interviewed who were us-

ers of solvent inhalants. In the context of the festival, time was spent with more than 1,000 participants, pilgrims, and locals who attended the church of San Hipólito.

It is estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 people attend the annual celebration. It is the third most visited church in Mexico, beaten only by the Basilica de Guadalupe and San Juan de los Lagos.\*

The sociodemographic data of the children and other people living on the street shows that seven out of ten are male. Their ages span from newborn to around 50 years old; the average age is 25. Some are illiterate; others never finished elementary school, and a minority have been to high school or have even learned some sort of trade: baking, electronics, building, or tailoring, among other skills.

Their occupations are varied and over time, one child might work by cleaning windshields, as a "fakir"\*\*\* street entertainer, collecting PET plastic, iron, or paper, or simply asking for money on public transport and in the streets.<sup>6</sup> They may also look after semi-empty properties, clean them, or guard them, sleeping there at night. Some collect the garbage left after the 28th of the month. Still others are *franeleros*\*\*\* (people who keep watch over parked cars), sweet-sellers on public transport, street entertainers, or dancers.

Some work as a "jackal" to earn money, which is playing the active role in homosexual relations.<sup>29,30</sup> Some women work as sex workers, to pay for their children's food in the room where they sleep.

The majority are migrants coming from elsewhere in Mexico; they sleep on the streets and occasionally in hotel rooms, which they pay for singly or with a group of people. This costs between MXN 120-150 pesos per day (approximately \$7-9 USD). A very small number manage to rent a small room to live in, for around MXN 1,200 (\$65 USD) a month.

There are also those who only spend time on the streets with their friends from afternoon till night-time, and then return to their homes. Moving between the streets and the family home is a recurrent practice; a process that gradually shows them what life is like on the streets, and prior learning that regularly leads people to leaving their homes permanently.

Once on the streets it is difficult to avoid consuming *activo*, a thinner-type solvent which is taken as a "mona" or puff: a piece of cloth soaked with the substance. Nearly all of them use multiple drugs, taking alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. A minority have also taken cocaine or crack, but practically none of them have experimented with heroin.<sup>31</sup>

\* A set of habitual uses in certain practices or ceremonies and objects used in said practices.

\*\* Grocery stores play a particularly important role, as street children go there to buy milk when trying to "cut off" their intoxication.

\* Marín B. (October 28, 2012). Article: Los 28, San Judas. El País. Taken from <http://blogs.elpais.com/periscopio-chilango/2012/10/san-judas-tadeo-mexico-df-san-hipolito.html>

\*\* Jumping or lying on pieces of broken glass.

\*\*\* An informal occupation involving keeping an eye on parked cars in public places and charging for this so-called "service". They use a piece of flannel [franela in Spanish] from which their name derives.

They regularly consume between 10 and 30 *monas* a day, but there are cases where over 1.3 quarts are consumed in a day. The vessel containing the *activo* is called the *mamila*, which is an 8oz PET plastic bottle which has fruit added - often guava - in order to give it a distinctive taste. A *mona* costs between MXN 5-10, a *mamila* between MXN 15-20, and *cans* between MXN 20-30. These transactions are part of an illegal activity of buying, selling, distributing, and consuming the substance.<sup>32</sup>

All participants in this study inhale *activo* and it generally takes just two or three months for a recent arrival to start using.<sup>31</sup> They have periods where they alternate between high and low consumption, and very sporadically, no consumption at all. In terms of time taking the drug, some have been taking it for more than 20 years, which is reflected in their physical and mental health:<sup>32-36</sup> malnutrition, neuropathy, and various alterations in functions such as memory, attention, and concentration, among others.<sup>37,38</sup>

The practice of inhaling *activo* has been linked to the cult of San Judas Tadeo in recent years; however, this relationship must be analyzed in more detail.

Ethnographic work shows that the street children do identify San Judas Tadeo as their "patron saint", they trust in him, he "makes them stop", and helps in their requests, including antisocial and criminal behaviors. Some have bracelets, medallions, necklaces, scapulars, or tattoos with the image of *San Juditas* on them. They ask him to take care of them, give them health, money, or food, and although few describe having obtained the favor they asked for, they continue asking for protection.

On the other hand, contrary to what might be believed, the street children do not attend mass for San Judas Tadeo.\* They are not seen inside the church, as they have restricted access to it. Furthermore, San Judas Tadeo is not the only object of their devotion - some believe in Santa Muerte, to whom they make offerings, light candles, and tattoo their bodies. There is a mix of cults, including the Virgin of Guadalupe and as such, in emotional and social terms, there is a type of "hybrid identity".

The festival of San Judas Tadeo is so important that thousands of believers attend, bearing "*San Juditas*" with beads and flowers. In groups, pairs, or alone, some inhale *activo* and some do not, but the image of the devout but "vicious" or "high" young person has lodged itself in the popular imagination. However, children, adults, seniors, and whole families attend the festivities and do not take drugs.

In this context, the day of the celebration is a special day for both street children and visitors who take *activo*. Both take advantage of the event to exchange objects, food, and substances. For those from outside, the *activo* they obtain at this event is better, because there is a variety of scents, fla-

vors, and types that are not available where they come from. For locals, it is an opportunity to obtain money, food, and to make friends.

Young people who attend do so to ask for practically the same favors: they ask for care, protection, health, work, and in general for them to return safe and well to their families. They attend every month and every year to give thanks for the miracles they receive. They come back to give thanks, or to fulfill a *manda* (vow) which consists of giving bracelets or beads with the image of the saint. Participants give each other candy, stamps, and food in a ritual of exchanging objects.

Visitors under the effects of *activo* are less physically and emotionally affected than the street children. Many are high school students who even arrive in their school uniform. It is known in some schools that there will be a high level of absence on the 28th of each month\* and especially during October.

In their accounts, it was seen that few ask San Judas Tadeo to stop them from taking *activo*. Those who did ask for this regularly attended mass and followed the whole ritual of taking an oath\*\* which committed them to giving up alcohol and drugs. But there are others who take a personal oath without telling the church authorities.

One of the most important groups that attends San Hipólito each month are so-called "tepichulos" and "guateñas". These are adolescents who come from the Tepito neighborhood, who share a feeling of belonging to the neighborhood and the *gang*, and who show this through their clothes, language, and the slogans they shout out in the crowds who flock to worship in the cult of *San Juditas*.

The constant presence of this group throws into stark relief how the festivities of San Judas Tadeo are a social space where various populations meet, among them street children and young people who visit San Hipólito monthly and yearly. Both groups may have *activo* inhalation in common, but they have their own problems and environments which are independent of one another.

It is difficult for the former to change their lifestyle and living conditions - they are "disconnected" from the social and working system, conventional ways of life, and they are not part of the social "mainstream"\*\*\*. The latter have a life

\* Gómez T. (December 28, 2010). Tolueno, droga de moda entre jóvenes [Tolueno, the drug of choice for young people]. El Universal. Taken from <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/182802.html>. Solera, C. (November 11, 2012). Crece adicción a inhalables; consumo se extiende a clase media [Growing addiction to solvents: consumption extends to the middle class]. Excelsior. Taken from <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2012/11/11/nacional/869117>

\*\* The ceremony unfolds as follows: sign up for the oath ceremony at a counter by the side of the altar. Receive a card with three prayers on it, on which is written your name and the promise of the time during which you will not drink or take drugs. This is usually between three months and a year. Go to the altar, kneel, and a priest will guide you in a prayer. There is a sermon about stopping consumption of drink and drugs, which emphasizes that the oath is serious and taken before San Judas Tadeo. You are given holy water and advised that you should buy the church magazine, and give some sort of donation which will be used for the street children.

\*\*\* Término que se utiliza para designar los pensamientos, gustos o preferencias aceptados mayoritariamente en la sociedad.

\* Between 16 and 18 masses take place on October 28, one after the other, with only a few minutes for the congregation to exit the church.

with more structure; the image of San Judas may just be one element in the configuration of their identity. They belong to a gang and to the neighborhood -frequently in the outer areas of the metropolitan area- but they can work or study as well as take solvents.

In short, the belief that street children in the Historic Center of Mexico City broadly follow the cult of San Judas Tadeo is not the case in reality. For the majority, the patron saint of difficult causes is not an important part of their daily lives, and they do not ask him to help them stop taking drugs.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Because street children are a population that is hidden and difficult to access, those interested in studying them must use a set of techniques and methodological strategies that go beyond application of questionnaires or interviews. Studying them requires immersion into their space, activities, daily practices, indeed their permanent lives - anything else will smack of superficiality.

In particular it was useful to use observation, social mapping, in-depth interviews, and undertaking an action investigation which involved the subjects in the study. At the same time, their most basic physical and mental health needs were met.

This was the path taken for this work in order to understand not only the practices in consumption of solvents, but also the contexts, relationships with others, beliefs, and general cultural aspects which surround the consumption and the festivities of San Judas Tadeo.

We believe that the use of this type of methodology is necessary in studies with groups that are found to be in highly vulnerable conditions, in which stigma and social prejudices make such groups invisible.

This approach also allowed us to break with the generalized idea that inhaling *activo* is the only activity done by street children. The results set out in this work show that a good part of their time is spent seeking money and food, amusing themselves, walking, cultivating emotionally significant relationships, playing football, and other activities.

Entering and being accepted into the groups studied also served to understand something of their beliefs, the way in which they channel them, and the weight they have upon their daily lives. San Judas Tadeo is not present at every moment of their lives, but the festival of the 28th of the month is the opportunity to eat differently to other days, scrounge a quick buck, and obtain solvents to inhale.

Because of the above, San Hipólito means a meeting place for socializing with other young people who inhale solvents, different to them in language and dress, and even in way of life and passing through the culture of the patron saint.

The street children do not take vows, give bracelets, candy, or food, they do not go to mass. Some have small

statues, bracelets, and necklaces they are given, but only occasionally do they get a blessing.

Despite their geographical proximity to the church of San Hipólito, the street children do not link solvent inhalation with the cult of "*San Juditas*". In any case, their attention during these celebrations is directed to the images and styles of the adolescents and young pilgrims. There is an intention to copy the fashions that distinguish them, the clothes they wear, the haircuts, the tattoos and the music that identifies some as "*reggaetoneros*".

In this sense, the figure of San Judas Tadeo is present, and the street children use his image in various objects, some even tattooing his image on their bodies. In this way, after months of observation and various accounts, it is clear that the street children have the desire to have what other young drug users have, and what they see every month, in ways that distinguish them from other believers.

In short, the relationship between practices of solvent consumption and the cult of San Judas Tadeo among both visitors and street children, is not a direct or categorical link. They do not consume out of devotion, and they are not devoted because of their consumption.

Street children do not join as devotees of San Judas Tadeo alone; Santa Muerte is a presence that is much more deeply rooted and with more history among these children.

The cult of San Judas Tadeo for street children in the Historic Center of Mexico City is a non-religious festival and one which simply allows them to have a day that is different from every other day of the year.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors do not declare any conflicts of interest.

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