



GREEK TRAGEDY

Still reeling from an HIV epidemic among injecting drug users, Greece is now dealing with a low-grade methamphetamine called ‘sisa’, that has joined heroin as the drug of choice for the country’s destitute population. **Max Daly** reports on a drug scene being shaped by financial collapse.

On the streets of Athens, there are places where Greece’s famous strong family bonds fail to reach. The country’s economic meltdown and the despair it has created, is being felt most keenly among the most deprived citizens, many of them homeless and disconnected from their families.

While frontline services are scaled down, the most desperate are increasingly seeking refuge in Athens’ dangerous street drug scene.

In May, the magazine and website *Vice* visited Athens to make a documentary, *Sisa: cocaine of the poor*. It revealed

that ‘sisa’, a local, cheap blend of methamphetamine, most commonly smoked using a glass pipe but also injected, was becoming popular with some of the city’s heroin users.

Charalampos Pouloupoulos, the head of Kethea, Greece’s anti-drug centre, describes sisa as an “austerity drug”. He told *Vice*: “The crisis has given dealers the possibility to promote a new, cheap drug, a cocaine for the poor. Sisa can be sniffed or injected and it can be made in home laboratories – you don’t need any specialised knowledge. It is extremely dangerous.”

At just three euros for a small wrap, sisa is far cheaper than a bag of heroin, which costs between 20 and 30 euros or a gram of cocaine, selling at between 30 and 100 euros. However, because of the intense highs and addictive nature of the drug, sisa users often buy several wraps throughout the day, as they scrape together what cash they can find in order to buy the next hit.

Methamphetamine, also known as crystal, glass, ice, yaba, crank or tweak depending on where you are, is a familiar sight on the world’s drug landscape in zones where alternative stimulant

drugs like ecstasy and cocaine are too expensive and difficult to source for the consumer.

A highly addictive stimulant, methamphetamine has gained popularity in rural America, south east Asia and Australasia precisely for these reasons. Like mephedrone, which has become an alternative affordable, injectable drug for heroin, speed and crack users in countries such as Ireland, the UK and Romania, methamphetamine is a DIY drug that can be made in bulk and sold on for a fraction of the price of other substances.

Many of the NGOs in Greece claim that *sis*a contains battery acid. The likely source of this rumour is that the methamphetamine available here is being produced using the inexpensive 'shake and bake' method, which utilizes lithium batteries and pseudoephedrine in the production process.

The arrival of *sis*a, according to drug experts, is exacerbating an already alarming public health emergency. Over the last three years, Greece has witnessed a rise in drug injecting and a subsequent HIV epidemic among its population of around 10,000 intravenous drug users, most of whom live in Athens.

Until 2010, HIV infections amongst injecting drug users in Greece numbered only 10 to 15 per year. In 2011, this number jumped to 256, while in the first half of 2012 an additional 314 cases were reported.

Injecting drug users represented more than a quarter of all HIV reported cases in 2011, as opposed to two to three per cent in previous years. However, by August 2012, a staggering 41 per cent of all newly recorded HIV infections were linked to injecting drug use.

According to those on the ground, the HIV epidemic, and the take up of *sis*a, is directly linked to Greece's crippling recession, now in its fifth year. Its citizens have had to cope with extreme politics, civil unrest and poverty. Social programmes and welfare have been cut by 40 per cent.

In a country of 11 million people, almost four million are unemployed, while those still working have seen their salaries cut by more than 30 per cent since 2009. As with most other government departments, health services have been hit by thousands of job losses. Meanwhile, rates of violence, theft, homicide, depression and suicide are all rising fast.

Greece, unfortunately for its people, is a modern example of how a serious economic downturn can impact on a nation's drug scene.

"Like most other people in Greece, the income of street drug users has dropped and there is a sense of helplessness," says Manina Terzidou, head of the Head of the Greek National Monitoring Centre for Drugs.

"What little money they got from handouts such as begging, occasional employment and charities has dried up. With many of the drug users we speak to, you cannot promise them anything. Even if they make that gigantic effort to get off drugs, then what hope do they have of getting a job?" says Terzidou.

Most street drug users in Athens have never received welfare benefits because as they have never worked, they are ineligible for financial help.

"So people resort to prostitution and cheaper drugs, such as *sis*a. Their drug use becomes more desperate and more risky. As we know, injecting is the recession method of taking drugs, because you get more bangs for your buck. So more people now are injecting heroin and even *sis*a."

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Terzidou says the HIV epidemic is being driven by a needle sharing culture.

"Although needles and syringes are free or very cheap, among street drug users in Athens there is now a habit of sharing needles. It's about belonging to a group."

Even though the Greek government responded quickly to the HIV epidemic by setting up 33 new opiate substitution therapy (OST) units in public hospitals in 2011 and 2012 – a step that is thought to have been instrumental in actually reducing drug related deaths, a crisis looms.

The new OST units have brought down the waiting list for treatment down from four years to two years, but that means there are still 6,000 problem drug users on the waiting list for treatment.

"There have been tremendous cuts in

drug, public health and mental health services and as a result we have seen a deterioration in these services," says Terzidou. "Here, the government does the very minimum it can. The system is working to absolute capacity, but I'm not sure it will stand much longer."

But it is not only the long term homeless who are getting dragged into this increasingly dangerous drug scene. Unemployment is 65 per cent among young people, and parents have no money to bail them out. So some people are falling through the cracks of Greece's creaking welfare system.

Despite recent increases in drug use among young people, the latest figures show that significantly lower proportions of young people use drugs in Greece compared to most of the other countries in the European region. Inhalants are the only drugs that young Greeks use more often than their European counterparts.

However, the national picture in terms of the adult population remains elusive. The National Focal Point, which gathers data on Greece for the EMCDDA, stresses that no new data is available on drug use in the general population, as no survey has been conducted since 2004.

Dr Christine Diamantopoulou, National Drug Coordinator of Greece, says the environment of uncertainty and insecurity for young people in Greece presents a clear and present danger on terms of drug use.

"Youth unemployment and loss of work has led to serious emotional problems such as fear, anxiety, and depression. Therefore recourse to substances, legal or illegal, acts as a palliative mechanism."

But Dr Diamantopoulou sees some element of hope amid the chaos.

"Because of the crisis and the cuts, the Greek state does not support the organizations that deal with drugs to the extent it should. Nevertheless, there is also a wide network of volunteers who offer their services to address the problem. Equally important is the contribution of the church, charities and private companies who have filled the gaps created by the underfunding.

"But importantly, in Greece, the family continues to operate, and supports its members who have a dependency problem."

■ **Max Daly** is a freelance journalist and author of *Narcomania: How Britain Got Hooked on Drugs* (paperback published in October 2013)