

Colombia drug treatment center plans spark debate

August 17 2012, by Jose Bautista

A proposal to open treatment centers in the Colombian capital for drug addicts is causing a stir in this cocaine-producing Latin American country.

The project, the brainchild of Bogota mayor Gustavo Petro, is aimed at curbing drug-related crime. Petro's office says it is similar to programs in Canada, Portugal, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

The plan is to treat the addicts with prescription medication, said Bogota [Health Secretary](#) Guillermo Alfonso Jaramillo.

Colombia has long focused on breaking up the [criminal gangs](#) responsible for trafficking [illegal drugs](#) to lucrative markets in the United States and Europe, but ignored the growing local population of addicts.

The centers are planned for three neighborhoods with large numbers of addicts and would especially target people hooked on "basuko," a cheap, highly addictive cocaine derivative similar to crack.

Nurses, doctors and psychiatrists would be on hand to treat the addicts. The centers would also provide food, access to bathroom facilities and even toys for children.

Last month, Colombia's Congress passed a law calling for [drug addiction](#) to be seen as a public health problem and not as a crime.

According to the mayor's office, 125,000 of Bogota's 7.3 million inhabitants use drugs. Of those, 70,000 are addicts, including some 7,000 basuco addicts.

If approved by the federal government, the centers could open in September.

Petro's proposal "has started a debate on the domestic consumption of cannabis, cocaine, basuko and heroin," said Alvaro Enciso, president of the La Luz foundation that supports drug addicts.

The project's detractors including Colombian Attorney General Alejandro Ordonez, who claims such centers "promote" [drug consumption](#) and that there is no certainty they cause a decrease in offenses.

In 2011, 252 of Bogota's 1,632 registered homicides -- 15.4 percent -- were linked to drugs, according to official figures.

In the 1980s and early 1990s Colombian cartels dominated the American [drug](#) trade, but a US-supported government crackdown has left local cartels in increasing disarray.

The regional cocaine trade, however, is still alive and well: in 2011 Colombia was the world's largest cocaine producer, according to a United Nations report. Colombia and neighboring Peru are the world's largest producers of coca, the plant used to make cocaine, according to the report.

Colombian criminal gangs as well as leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitary groups sell the [cocaine](#) to Mexican criminal syndicates, who then smuggle it into the United States and Europe.

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