

Freebase cocaine in mainland France: recent trends

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At the end of the 2000s, the OFDT's TREND (Emerging Trends and New Drugs) scheme, which focuses on following intense drug-using populations, revealed trends on access to freebase cocaine - including crack cocaine - and its use. These trends were practically undetectable in general population surveys¹. There was an observed emergence in several provincial cities of micromarkets for freebase cocaine, which was previously produced on a small scale for individual consumption. At the same time, in Paris, the crack market underwent changes in terms of both supply and demand. Given the highly addictive nature of freebase cocaine, the increased accessibility of this drug led TREND to focus on examining these market changes. To confirm and explain the observed phenomena, in 2011 and 2012, six out of the seven TREND sites (Bordeaux, Marseille, Metz, Paris, Rennes, Toulouse) conducted a specific investigation. This issue of Tendances presents the key results. These results, along with the data of the SINTES (National Detection System of Drugs and Toxic Substances) scheme make it possible to establish a report on freebase cocaine use and markets in mainland France.

■ Reasons for the phenomenon

Freebase cocaine use became a visible problem in mainland France in the late 80s and early 90s, when an "open drug scene"² developed in the North of Paris. At that time, the phenomenon was related to a sort of transfer to France of the crack epidemic seen in African American and Latino American ghettos

Analysis of crack cocaine and freebase cocaine use and markets from a specific investigation within the 2011-2012 TREND scheme.



in the United States since the mid-70s; the crack use phenomenon travelled to mainland France through the French overseas departments (Martinique, French Guiana, Guadeloupe) [1]. Until the early 2000s, use of this form of cocaine remained fairly stable in terms of user profile (the vast majority of users were very marginal) and geographic location (use mainly took place in districts in the north of Paris). It was the sharp rise in cocaine use in the general population in the second half of the 90s that revealed a new freebase cocaine user profile unlike those being observed at the time in Paris. This new user profile frequented the alternative party scene (free parties, underground raves) of the techno movement and, in contrast to the marginalised users in Greater Paris, these alternative party scene users transformed their cocaine themselves. Most importantly, this new user profile named the obtained substance freebase or freebase cocaine, and not crack.

Cocaine freebasing: production and effects

Transforming cocaine hydrochloride (powder) into freebase cocaine (crack or freebase cocaine) is a multi-step process. Cocaine is first crushed and deposited into a spoon, then mixed with ammonia or sodium bicarbonate. The resultant mixture is heated to transform the cocaine into a solid base form. The obtained rock is then rinsed with water and broken up into small pieces for smoking in a pipe that users can produce themselves from cans or bottles.

The effects of freebase cocaine are shorter in duration and more intense than those of powdered cocaine hydrochloride, when snorted. Inhaling the drug into the lungs means that it is rapidly detected by the brain (within about 10 seconds), generating an intense "sensation of pleasure" that lasts a few minutes. This brief high and the subsequent depressive low lead users to engage in compulsive, repetitive use of the substance. ■

1. While marginal in the general population, 0.6% of 15-to-30-year-olds have engaged in lifetime freebase and crack cocaine use according to the 2010 Health Barometer survey of the INPES (French National Institute for Prevention and Health Education). The OFDT's ESCAPAD Survey on Health and Use on National Defence and Citizenship Day indicated a rate of 0.8% lifetime use among 17-year-olds in 2011.

2. Public places became the preferred site for using and dealing the substance.

Freebase versus crack

Since 2001, the TREND scheme has identified two distinct distribution circuits for freebase cocaine in France. The first is for freebase cocaine produced by users themselves and consumed as freebase. The second is for crack cocaine. Freebase use has developed on the alternative party scene, particularly in Lille, Marseille and Rennes, while crack remains somewhat confined to Greater Paris, despite the sporadic emergence of local provincial markets. The semantic distinction is crucial because it promotes the spread of freebase cocaine among certain techno movement populations since many of the users frequenting this scene are convinced they are not using crack, but rather, a substance that is fundamentally different. A study named "Quantifestif" conducted by the OFDT in 2004 and 2005 demonstrated a high prevalence of lifetime use: over 20% of people surveyed had engaged in lifetime freebase use, and this prevalence reached over 40% among "alternative" partygoers [3]. Afterwards, freebase cocaine use became established and spread throughout France, with a well-anchored Parisian crack scene whose sociodemographic profile has barely changed over time, and a freebase cocaine scene that is spreading to more socially-stable populations [4]. To this end, in the 2000s, France experienced the same phenomenon seen in the United States in the 80s, with crack use concentrated mainly in African and Latino American ghettos in major cities and freebase use seen mainly in white middle class populations.

■ A dichotomy

Social status and production

User perceptions of a given substance are primordial to understanding the spread in freebase cocaine use seen in the 2000s. It is likely that the slow spread in crack use in France, and the inability of crack use to become entrenched outside of Greater Paris, is due to the negative image of this substance among users and non-users alike. Subsequently, it is not the intrinsic effects of the substance that limit its more widespread use, but rather, the social status of those who use it. While the significant spread in French cocaine use that started in the 90s was due in large part to the drug's association with the party scene and show business, crack's negative image was exacerbated by the profile of its users, who were generally associated with the most extreme socially marginal situations. Furthermore, in addition to this negative image of crack users, the TREND scheme observers also noted a certain number of "beliefs" circulating among freebase users. According to these beliefs, crack is produced from cocaine's

Crack in the United States

Crack appeared on the US market in the late 70s. At the time, it was mainly immigrants from the West Indies, and Jamaica in particular, who created this substance, which developed on the North American market following geopolitical changes in the cocaine market [2]. Given the short supply of precursors in Colombia, and diethyl ether in particular, drug traffickers decided to move the refining of cocaine paste (PBC) to the West Indies, or even export the paste directly to Florida in the hope of encouraging local cocaine paste (basuco) consumption similar to what was occurring in Latin America at the time. Certain cannabis users became accustomed to smoking PBC and, as they immigrated to the United States, contributed to the rise in demand for smokable cocaine. Since PBC use did not spread, dealers added sodium bicarbonate or ammonia to produce crack, the use of which spread rapidly through poor districts of US cities. ■

"waste". *"Crack still has a negative image. The substance is perceived as [...] 'what is left after transforming cocaine paste into powder cocaine'. This myth is what maintains the different names for cocaine substances"*, explains a TREND observer in Marseille, quoting a user.

In contrast, freebase cocaine has a better reputation among those who use it, at least, as long as these users believe they can control their consumption. Two factors explain this difference. One factor is the social context: experienced users who frequent free parties or urban parties are far removed from the world of the streets. Moreover, there is a certain "prestige" attached to making and using freebase cocaine, which requires expertise, self-control and experience. This makes freebasers a sort of "elite" user group that, according to the Metz trend site, shares *"a distinct sign"*. The other factor is the supposed virtues of freebasing: freebase users believe that freebasing generates a "purified" cocaine that, thanks to the ammonia, eliminates cutting agents³ and purportedly provides more intense effects than powder cocaine: *"There is widespread user belief that freebasing purifies cocaine."* *"Through freebasing, you remove all of those little impurities so that you're left with quality cocaine, the very essence of cocaine, really."* (Ethnographic Fieldnote/Rennes)

Non-users' negative perceptions

Outside the circle of users, especially those who frequent the techno party scene, freebase cocaine has a fairly negative reputation. Its production and use requires a certain isolation, which runs counter to the party image. In addition, the relatively violent effects that follow use, as well as the possible frequent compulsive use that ensues, triggers fear: unlike ecstasy or cocaine hydrochloride, freebase cocaine is not always considered, by users and non-users alike, a party drug. In addition, the fact that certain regular freebase users also use heroin, a substance that is still frequently demonised on the party scene, to control coming down off of freebase cocaine, decreases the substance's popularity.

What the analyses say

Within the SINTES scheme, ten samples of cocaine hydrochloride with varying levels of potency were collected from freebase users, and then each sample was divided in to three parts. One of these parts was directly analysed in a laboratory, while the two others were analysed after being freebased (10 samples were freebased with ammonia and five were freebased with sodium bicarbonate; the difference was due to logistic reasons). Each sample was freebased by the user who provided the sample. Each user had a different level of freebasing experience. The results demonstrated that the supposed "purification" of the cocaine by the freebasing should be interpreted with caution. All pharmacologically active cutting agents (e.g., levamisole, phenacetin, diltiazem) present in the sample prior to testing were still present in the freebased substance, regardless of the freebasing agent used (ammonia or sodium bicarbonate).

The analyses revealed an increase in the mean cocaine potency of freebased samples, from 47% to 55% for samples transformed with ammonia, and 52% to 59% for samples transformed with sodium bicarbonate. The "yield" (obtained potency/starting potency) was therefore slightly positive, but on average, identical regardless of the reagent used, and said reagent could not be identified in the finished substance. Based on the limited number of samples, these variations in yield mainly seem related to the operating procedure used and expertise⁴. The purity of the final substance is therefore mainly related to that of the initial substance. For three out of 10 samples, the yield was less than one, i.e., the cocaine potency was lower in the transformed substance than in the starting substance

3. This differentiation, through which crack and freebase differ due to the substance used for transformation (either sodium bicarbonate or ammonia), is based on the fact that the sodium bicarbonate transformation technique is, according to certain users, more complex for an individual user, and used mainly by "professionals" who transform large quantities of substance where crack markets exist.

4. The limited number of samples analysed meant that real statistical relationships could not be identified.

(for two ammonia-freebased samples and one bicarbonate-freebased sample). Given the current street cocaine (hydrochloride) market⁵, for which nearly half of all seized quantities had a purity of less than 20% and for which 70% had purity of less than 40% in 2012, it can be estimated that half of the freebase cocaine currently consumed has potency of less than 30%, and that one out of seven samples has potency of above 50%.

At the same time, about a dozen samples collected on the crack market were analysed. Although the analyses demonstrated that the same cutting agents are present, the purity levels were 60% to 70% (65% on average). Therefore, it appears that despite beliefs, crack that is sold as is on the traditional market is of higher purity than freebase cocaine. This most likely can be explained by the fact that crack is produced by "professional" freebasers (see below the "new markets" section) who source purer cocaine from wholesalers.

■ Freebase cocaine users

Experienced freebase users

Today, like in the 2000s, freebase users are most often travellers. These are people who travel across Europe to raves and free parties hidden in protective lorries that are conducive to freebase cocaine consumption due to the constraints of producing this substance: *"It's given that freebasing requires people to remain hidden and in small groups so that, in these vehicles, use can be organised, generally for a limited circle of friends."* (Ethnographic Fieldnote/Metz).

There is also an increase in the use of the substance during private parties for more socially integrated populations who come together for freebasing "sessions". This use occurs rarely during party events, where snorted cocaine hydrochloride tends to be used. The common denominator for these users is experience, not only with cocaine, but also with other substances. Therefore, users less frequently consume freebase cocaine, both because they fear its powerful effects and because it is not as easily obtained as cocaine powder. This is why the TREND scheme observers insist that, in the majority of cases, experienced users consume freebase cocaine and its use tends to take place after a long period of snorting cocaine [4].

However, although more socially integrated populations tend to use freebase cocaine, ENaCAARUD surveys (National surveys of low-threshold CAARUD structures) demonstrate that freebasing is on the rise, including among more marginalised users. Subsequently, the 2012 survey revealed a higher prevalence than in the previous year's survey: 32.9% of last month cocaine users claimed that they had used freebase cocaine versus 23.4% in 2008, or 11.9% of all CAARUD clients

in 2012 [5]. Smoking enables injecting drug users, including cocaine injectors, to keep from further damaging their veins while still continuing to use their preferred substance. Furthermore, smoking promotes a certain form of harm reduction, since it avoids injection, which can lead to hepatitis C virus and AIDS transmission⁶.

Since 2010, it seems that the spread of freebasing is also in response to a decline in the purity of cocaine circulating in France [6]. For some users, freebase cocaine enables them not only to experience the effects related to this substance in particular, but also to re-experience the sensations that snorting a mediocre-quality substance cannot provide, all against a background in which smoking, of heroin among others, has been on the rise in France for several years [6].

New crack user profiles

In mainland France, the number of crack users in 2010 has been estimated at 11,350 to 20,000 individuals [7]. A large majority of these users come from Greater Paris: although the national average for recent crack use (crack purchased as crack) was approximately 17.5% among CAARUD clients in France, it was 48.0% in Greater Paris, and only 6.0% in all other regions of mainland France⁷. This user profile has not changed much in the last 20 years. The majority of crack users are in very precarious, socially marginal situations and engage in compulsive use. The 2012 ENaCAARUD survey also revealed a population that was older than the mean CAARUD client age - 38.0 years of age versus 34.1 years of age for all CAARUD clients - and there were proportionally more women [5].

However, since 2010, TREND scheme observers in Paris have witnessed a change in the northeast Paris crack user profile. As a result, dealers are being increasingly visited by socially integrated users. Some of these users are starting to experience more precariousness, which given the increasing price of cocaine hydrochloride⁸, means that they can no longer purchase powder cocaine and transform it themselves. As a result, they fulfil their needs on the crack market: large "rocks" of crack cocaine sell for 35 to 40 Euros apiece, and small rocks sell for as little as 5 to 10 Euros. The median price of a gram of powder cocaine was as high as 76 Euros in 2012⁹. There is also a population of users who do not master the techniques required to freebase cocaine. These two profiles also exist outside of Paris (Bordeaux, Toulouse, Marseille), where micromarkets for freebase cocaine have cropped up.

■ New markets

Although Paris has historically held a monopoly over the French freebase cocaine market, for the last few years the

situation has changed somewhat with the appearance of provincial micromarkets. In addition, crack distribution in Paris is developing.

Are new dealing sites emerging in provincial France?

Contrary to what was feared when crack first appeared in Paris, the crack market model never really spread to provincial France. Of course, during the 2000s, small crack dealing sites cropped up, like in Toulouse, or more recently, Marseille, but these sites did not last. Ethnographic observations conducted at the time demonstrated that this expansion of crack was usually the result of user-dealers from Paris or French overseas departments passing through. These limited dealing scenes did not have a real customer base, probably due to the bad reputation crack has due to the effects of its use.

However, since 2011, Bordeaux, Marseille and Toulouse have experienced the appearance of small freebase cocaine markets run by cocaine or freebase-consuming user-dealers. Contrary to Paris, the substances sold in these cities are "artisanal", and not "industrial". Also, sales do not take place through structured networks supported by the cannabis resin market.

These micromarkets seem to cater to demand coming from users who like freebase cocaine but are inexperienced in freebasing cocaine. *"What seems to induce some buyers to purchase already-freebased cocaine is the fear of substance loss if the 'cooking' is no good."* (Ethnographic Fieldnote/Bordeaux) For others, especially marginal polydrug users or people with limited financial resources, such purchases are motivated by financial factors. It is difficult to tell whether or not this phenomenon will last. In any event, the crack cocaine versus freebase cocaine dichotomy is becoming blurred. As a result, from Metz to Toulouse, users who frequent deal sites speak of "freebase cocaine", or even "crack" when referring to the substance they use, a sign that may indicate that users are realising that freebase cocaine and crack cocaine really are, toxicologically, one and the same: *"As far as crack is concerned, it clearly seems at the site that an acculturation processes is underway. [...] This crack use is different from the model familiar to all experts that arose from the West Indies, New York, or the street. We are not tal-*

5. The cocaine used by users who freebase for their own use and people close to them.

6. It should be noted, however, that HCV and HBV transmission can occur when sharing crack and freebase pipes.

7. If we take into account all use of freebase cocaine, including crack, 24.2% of all CAARUD clients are concerned and in Greater Paris, this number rises to 51.1%.

8. Since 2011, the *Baromètre-prix* price report of the TREND scheme and the Central Office for the Repression of Drug-related Offences (OCTIS) have been reporting an increase in the mean price of a gram of powder cocaine to around 65-70 Euros in France.

9. A gram of cocaine can produce a "large rock" of freebase cocaine, which can then be divided into smaller rocks.

king here about large rocks, pipes or buying from "modous" (traditional dealers from West Africa). [...] Users buy crack by the gram from people they know who have developed supply for a specific demand." (Ethnographic Fieldnote/Toulouse)

Changes in the Paris crack market

For the last five years or so, the Paris market has been changing in two key ways. First, the main dealer profile has changed. Instead of *modous*¹⁰ from West Africa, a new type of dealer, who generally sells cannabis resin in the Paris social housing estates, is getting involved in crack dealing. This phenomenon became visible in 2008, and was characterised by territorial disputes that succeeded in at least partially evicting traditional dealers and replacing them with more structured organisations. These organisations are part of the more general changes in the drug market, in which cocaine and cannabis resin are more increasingly being sold at well-established points of sale in the social housing estates of northern Paris, or in the bordering département of Seine-Saint-Denis. In keeping with this trend, there is an apparent permanency, similar to the cannabis resin distribution model, being established in the hallways of social housing estate buildings in the 19th and 20th arron-

dissements of Paris. Ethnographic observations reveal "a truly professional structure based on efficiency (no lost time, no lateness) and organisation to protect the network from law enforcement [...]." (Ethnographic Fieldnotes/Paris) This situation is not only changing in terms of dealing, but also in terms of the customer base, which tends to come from a more socially integrated universe, thereby confirming this new demand for already-freebased cocaine by users who no longer consider freebase and crack cocaine to be fundamentally different.

Conclusion

The use of "freebase cocaine" has been on the rise in France in the last 20 years. This is not the result of an expansion of the crack scene, which remains more or less limited to the north of Paris, but rather, comes from the techno movement.

Today, freebase cocaine use is marginal in the general population, but continues to expand through certain sectors of the techno party scene and through more precarious users. This phenomenon may further develop due to the loss of patience by some cocaine users for increasingly lower quality product, and the development in the supply of freebase cocaine outside of Greater Paris. Two metropolitan markets currently co-

exist. The first market is structured, and still limited to Paris. This market offers a more concentrated freebase cocaine substance that is transformed on a larger scale from purer powder cocaine. The other market is emerging in provincial French cities, and is erratic and fragmented. The substance supplied is of lower purity, and this lower quality is directly related to the lower quality of the circulating cocaine in these areas. Contrary to popular belief, crack cocaine and freebase cocaine have identical toxicological profiles. Therefore, the "purification" myth has been disproven through analyses.

Finally, although freebase cocaine continues to enjoy a positive reputation among users due to its supposed higher "purity", ethnographic surveys seem to indicate that the substance's poor image among non-consuming populations represents a limitation to the potential spread of its use in mainland France. This is especially true given the increasingly visible social and health issues related to this use [8].

10. This term comes from the West African Wolof language, and means «small-scale merchant».

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methodological references points

The specific "crack/freebase" investigation was conducted in 2011 and 2012 at six of the seven TREND scheme sites: Bordeaux, Marseille, Metz, Paris, Rennes, Toulouse. This research was conducted using the scheme's traditional data collection tools: ethnographic surveys on the party scene (free parties, discotheques, private parties) and in the urban setting (CAARUDs, squats, the street), user interviews, "law enforcement" and "health" focus groups, and SINTES analyses.

For a detailed presentation of the TREND scheme, please refer to *Tendances* issue no. 86 [6].