

Film

El susto and the Mexican sugar tax

In Latin American culture, *el susto*, which roughly translates as “the shock”, is an illness that is prompted by some kind of trauma. The heightened emotion is thought to cause your soul to leave your body. You are left enervated and listless. According to a 2016 survey, three-quarters of Mexicans think that type 2 diabetes is caused by *el susto*. “The bad diet and then *el susto*, that’s why my blood sugar spiked”, explains Genoveva, one of the interviewees in Karen Akins’ impressively researched documentary on Mexico’s pioneering sugar tax.

Genoveva attributes her *susto* to being kidnapped. Mexico can be a lawless place. Still, the death toll from violence, though unconscionably high, is dwarfed by the number of Mexicans who die each year as a result of type 2 diabetes. *El Susto*, the documentary, tells the story of how a bunch of spirited activists persuaded the political establishment to take action against a crisis that threatens to overwhelm Mexico’s health-care system.

The concept of *el susto* is rooted in folk belief. Remove the spiritual element, and it comes down to an external force destabilising one’s health. For the body politic in Mexico, the shock that led to the diabetes epidemic came from across the border. Millions of litres of sugar-sweetened beverages, most notably Coca-Cola, have poured into Mexico, saturating virtually every corner of the country. On average, a new Coca-Cola-sponsored shop opens in Mexico every 8 hours. The company’s cheery red logo is ubiquitous, adorning walls and storefronts in cities, towns, and rural outposts. “Coca-Cola has become a cultural component”, sighs historian Pilar Zazueta, partway through *El Susto*. The company’s projected investment

in Mexico came to US\$12.4 billion for 2010–20.

The aggressive marketing has had quite an effect. From 1984 to 1998, consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages rose by 37.2% in Mexico. Over the same period, consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables fell by 29.3%. If they wish, Mexicans can purchase fizzy drinks in 3 L receptacles. During 2012, 2 years before the sugar tax was introduced, each Mexican drank an average of 372 regular cans of sugared soda, the highest per-person consumption in the world. It does not take long for such statistics to turn sinister. Every year, Mexico sees 75 000 amputations as a result of type 2 diabetes and 24 000 deaths as a result of excessive consumption of sugary drinks.

Needless to say, Mexican children are especially keen on the syrupy concoctions that have flooded their communities. An astonishing two-thirds of infants aged 1–2 years in the country drink sugar-sweetened beverages. “What is impacting the most right now is seeing how indigenous women are giving sodas to their babies”, notes Mark Pendergrast, author of a biography of Coca-Cola and one of a roster of articulate and knowledgeable interviewees assembled by Akins. *El Susto* includes footage of toddlers swigging from enormous bottles of sugar-loaded liquid, their hands barely able to hold the container. Inadequate access to clean water exacerbates the problem. Parents figure that sugar is preferable to dysentery.

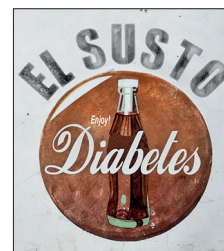
Akins adeptly organises her narrative. She begins by examining the individual cost of diabetes, before assuredly expanding her focus to the multinationals and Mexico’s political machine. *El Susto* is particularly effective in its exploration of the values and tactics of the soft-drinks

industry, as well as their outsized influence and vaulting ambition.

The film centres on the campaign for the sugar tax. WHO reckons a 20% tax reduces consumption by roughly the same amount. Mexican proponents of an equivalent levy faced fierce resistance, which occasionally took the form of threats and outright criminality. Activists were targeted with sophisticated spyware. Opposition to the tax came from unlikely sources. The campaigners could not even count on the support of the health secretary or the then-director of the Mexican Diabetes Federation (who subsequently took a job with Coca-Cola). Television networks refused to air adverts warning of the dangers of sugar, presumably in order not to alienate the soft-drinks industry.

The campaign for Mexico’s sugar tax sprawled across years, beset by setbacks. It often seemed hopeless. Enrique Peña Nieto, who served as President of Mexico from 2012 to 2018, bragged of drinking a Coca-Cola every day, though he quickly added that it was one of their sugar-free offerings. But the campaigners eventually prevailed. A sugar tax set at 10% was rolled out in 2014. Several other nations have since adopted similar measures. In the 2 years following the advent of the tax, consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages in Mexico fell by 7.6%. Mexicans are still drinking far too much soda, but it is a good start. Nonetheless, as *El Susto* amply demonstrates, there can be no mistaking the magnitude of the challenge that lies ahead. As Pendergrast notes, “Coca-Cola is not talking just about competing with Pepsi, they’re talking about any kind of liquid that you consume.”

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Lancet Diabetes Endocrinol 2020

Published Online
February 19, 2020
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587\(20\)30065-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-8587(20)30065-6)

El Susto

Karen Akins
2019, 75 min
<https://elsustomovie.com/>

For more on the 2016 survey see
<https://newsweekspanol.com/2017/01/el-76-de-los-mexicanos-aun-cree-que-un-susto-causa-diabetes/>

For more on pre-tax consumption of sugared soda in Mexico see Nestle M. Soda politics. Oxford University Press USA, 2015