

Methamphetamine: America in Crisis

Methamphetamine is not just a substance abuse problem. The social impact of methamphetamine reaches farther and wider than many know. As part of our effort to stay on the forefront of the meth problem, we receive newspaper clippings related to methamphetamine. Every day there are usually over 100 articles on methamphetamine and meth labs. It is evident that methamphetamine reaches and affects all corners of society. Here are some startling facts about meth and the problem we face:

- In some states nearly 50% of children in custody with Child Protective Services come from meth labs and that percentage is increasing. DEA statistics show that 30% of labs have had children living in them at the time they were seized. The drug is so addictive it can break one of the most powerful of human bonds; the bond between a mother and her child. Children are abused and go uncared for. Some of the most violent crimes against children have been committed by meth addicts and many kids have been injured by the chemicals used in the manufacturing process. Long-term health effects to the young are also suspected.
- On an average week, 4-5 meth labs explode and/or burn down. In addition to the cooker, children living in these homes have been killed or badly burned and unsuspecting neighborhoods are in danger from these labs.
- Traces of methamphetamine have been found in hotels and motels across the country. Unsuspecting business travelers may have unknowingly been exposed to traces of meth, iodine and other chemicals left behind by those who previously used the rooms to cook meth.
- Entire towns have had to be evacuated from the release of anhydrous ammonia, an extremely dangerous chemical sought after by meth makers, endangering thousands each year. While many steal the ammonia from farmers, there are many industrial and commercial uses of the chemical that could be a source of ammonia for a meth cooker. Ammonia is the most common industrial refrigerant. Thieves have damaged valves leaving ammonia to leak and endanger nearby businesses and residences. In Florida, one thief attempted to steal ammonia from an underground pipeline causing a mass evacuation of a nearby town and closure of an interstate freeway.
- Violence on police officers are on an increase, fueled by the effects of meth addiction. Earlier this year two Bradford County Pennsylvania deputies serving a warrant were ambushed and killed. Other police officers have been injured by booby-trapped labs and shot at by deranged addicts.
- Recent studies reveal a 68% increase in American workers testing positive for meth. Workers abusing meth cost society millions of dollars in lost productivity. A recent study in one city alone quantified the cost at over \$20 million. In addition, workers who abuse drugs compromise the safety of millions of workers and ordinary citizens when such workers operate heavy equipment, drive trucks and perform other duties that could affect the safety and health of others.
- A March 9, 2004 an MSNBC story reported that nearly 90% of identify theft is drug related with meth accounting for the vast majority of the crime. Last year, 10 million Americans were victims of identify theft. Fraud caseloads have increased 300% in some parts of the country. Police officers around the country say nearly every time they bust an ID theft ring, the criminals are meth addicts. Meth's unique psychopharmacological properties

assist identity theft because of the detail-oriented and obsessive-compulsive aspects of the drug. While this has received national attention, no national strategy to combat this aspect of the problem has surfaced.

- A large percentage of auto theft, home burglaries and mail theft are committed by meth users. In Washington State, almost 60% of auto theft is meth related. A U.S. postal inspector in Portland, Oregon reports that mail theft is on the increase and that 95 percent of the people arrested for mail theft are methamphetamine users.
- Thousands and probably more likely tens of thousands of homes that were former meth labs are being reoccupied without clean-up. Little is known whether or not there are long-term effects from these labs but few states have laws that require former labs to be assessed and cleaned up and no national studies have been carried out to define "how clean is clean". Some people report getting ill after moving into a dwelling formerly used as a meth lab but no studies have yet been carried out to confirm the link between those reported illnesses and the chemicals left behind in those labs.
- Our prisons are filled with thousands of meth addicts, costing American taxpayers millions and overtaxing our prison system. Methamphetamine is becoming the leading drug of choice and many correctional institutions are fighting an uphill battle keeping the drug out of our prisons. In one case, the wife of an inmate soaked letters sent to him in meth. The inmate then sold pieces of the letter to other inmates.
- Taxpayers are saddled with the cost of medical treatment for inmates suffering from the effects of meth abuse. Prisons have spent money for dental work on inmates because of problems caused by prior abuse of the drug.
- Judges are being overwhelmed by meth cases. In some states, meth cases account for as much as 44% of their case load. The public is also spending millions in legal support for individuals committing crimes to support their drug habit.
- Law enforcement has spent millions of dollars training and protecting officers who have to deal with hazardous environments investigating and seizing illegal drug labs. Some agencies can not get the training they need because of the cutbacks in federal funding and/or insufficient funding to train all of the officers needed to fight the growing problem. Many who are trained then find it difficult to get the equipment they need to stay safe.
- Crime labs are overwhelmed by thousands of meth cases in their respective states, causing major backlogs and affecting their ability to operate effectively. Kentucky officials recently had to work on reducing a 10,000-case backlog created in part by the state's growing methamphetamine problem. A judge in the state even threatened to fine the lab \$100 a day for contempt of court if cases were not processed promptly. It has even forced prosecutors to dismiss cases because of the lack of appropriate evidence to support a successful prosecution.
- First responders have suffered a variety of injuries at methamphetamine labs. Many law enforcement officers have been injured by ammonia, hydrogen chloride and phosphine. One officer from the Yukon Police Department lost 40% of her lung capacity when she was exposed to phosphine and is now permanently disabled. Several firefighters died in California last year when their air tanker broke up in mid air fighting a fire started by meth cookers.
- Public agency personnel who maintain our streets, manage our waste and enforce building code violations are injured or exposed to toxic chemical wastes generated and disposed of improperly by meth cookers. Many cookers discard their chemical waste in the garbage

which has led to fires in garbage trucks, transfer stations and landfills. Street maintenance workers who are forced to pick up discarded waste on our public roads have been exposed to chemicals when they unknowingly picked up waste they didn't know or suspect contained chemical waste. Many private citizens have also been hurt by meth cookers and/or by the chemical waste they leave behind. Hunters have been shot at by addicts cooking in our forests when they accidentally stumbled onto a cook.

Anyone can be impacted by the problem. It doesn't matter where you live. The epidemic, once thought to be a west-coast problem, has swept across the country and has reached the eastern seaboard. Just this year, Vermont had their first lab. History tells us that it won't be their last. States like New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina are watching the meth epidemic spread from the western parts of the states eastward. Florida has tried to respond as the problem spread eastward and south from the panhandle to the peninsula. It is likely to be on the doorsteps of the Capitol soon.

America is not the only country suffering from the effects of this drug. Methamphetamine is a worldwide problem. The King of Thailand recently declared war on the meth makers in their country, stating that it is their number one drug problem. A huge methamphetamine lab was recently seized in Fiji. The lab, run by Chinese nationals and local Fijians is believed to have supplied a large amount of meth to Australia, Asia and the U.S.

Law enforcement has worked tirelessly to combat the manufacture and distribution of the drug but they need more funding and more resources to continue the battle. Individual states are tackling the problem but no cohesive national strategy exists. No other drug problem has impacted our nation more than meth, yet it lacks the priority needed and funding to fight the problem has been reduced while the problem gets worse. The meth epidemic has to be viewed as more than a "substance abuse" issue. It isn't affecting just the users, who many have little sympathy for. It is our problem, it affects all of us directly or indirectly.

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