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Meth labs make a comeback in Tennessee

New ingredients and methods speed production of drug

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Tennessee drug agents are witnessing an alarming comeback in the production of methamphetamine.

Police call it the poor man's drug, appealing because it is cheap to make with household ingredients and turns a lucrative profit on the streets. Also, the drug elicits an almost immediate, long-term high that outlasts more expensive drugs. But it can destroy the human body in a matter of months.

"If we stay on course with the seizures this year, we'll be at about 1,300 labs, which brings us back to 2004 figures," said Tommy Farmer, director of the TBI's Methamphetamine Task Force. "It would be the highest number since 2004."

Tennessee ranked third in the nation in meth production in 2008. In the Nashville area, Williamson County stands out for a spike in cases.

The resurgence began when tighter border security made it increasingly difficult to import meth from Mexico, and when producers here discovered they could make meth more quickly and efficiently by using new ingredients and new methods.

Experts say a first-time meth user can get hooked immediately, sometimes with deadly consequences.

A recent study by a California nonprofit shows meth caused 900 deaths nationwide in 2005, and cost the United States about \$23.4 billion. Taxpayers spent millions for criminal justice, drug treatment, foster care, and for cleaning up the labs and the toxic wastes they produced.

And businesses paid millions in lost productivity because of meth addicts in the work force.

"The big deal with meth is how quickly someone can get addicted and how fast it can take someone to the bottom," said Thurston Moore, clinical director of Nashville's Bradford Health Services.

"I hear people say they took one hit and then became addicted. It's such a high high. They don't care if they lose their kids or go to jail. It becomes the only thing they live for."

Bodies show effects

Tennessee's meth problem surfaced in 2000 and peaked five years ago when law officers busted 1,559 labs statewide.

Its ravaging effects on first-time users could be increasingly seen on the gaunt bodies of people showing up for treatment.

One counselor described a 42-year-old mother hooked on methamphetamine who entered a drug treatment program last year hoping that would persuade a judge to grant visitation with her 7-year-old daughter.

The middle-class stay-at-home mom was emaciated, littered with open sores and missing half of her decaying teeth.

After leaving her husband, she drained her savings and racked up more than \$50,000 in credit card debt. Eventually, she turned to prostitution to finance her habit.

The clinic worked with her for about three weeks and then she disappeared.

Farmer and other law enforcement officials say Tennessee's location exacerbates the problem because meth makers can easily travel to neighboring states for supplies.

"Our state borders more states than almost any other, and is intersected by highways that stretch from Canada to Key West and the Pacific to the Atlantic," Farmer said.

At the urging of law enforcement, state legislators responded to the crisis by passing the Meth-Free Tennessee Act. The law limited access to cold and allergy medicine containing pseudoephedrine and ephedrine, which are both used to manufacture meth. Consumers were limited to buying only 9 grams of pseudoephedrine in a 30-day period, and pharmacies began keeping records of who bought the medicines.

It seemed to help. Lab seizures declined and in 2007 dropped to a low of 589.

Police thought they were getting the upper hand. But last year, investigators began to notice meth's revival when the number of lab busts climbed to 823.

"Users and cooks weren't just going to sit there and watch their business go away," said Dr. Rick Rawson, associate director of UCLA's Integrated Substance Abuse Programs, who has been studying

meth for 20 years.

A meth manufacturer can spend \$100 or less for all the chemicals needed to produce the drug and reap a profit of \$600 to \$900 for selling just 7 to 10 grams of it.

Meth makers found a way around the restrictions with the help of some of their own customers.

The practice is called smurfing.

The meth manufacturer, or cook, hires people to travel to several stores and sometimes other states to buy the legal limit of pseudoephedrine or ephedrine. They take the supplies to the cook, who in turn offers the smurfer a discount on meth, Rawson said.

A large number of pharmacies and stores in Nashville make the city an attractive place to buy supplies, investigators report. But there's not a lot of meth made in Music City.

Metro Capt. Todd Henry of the specialized investigations division said cocaine and crack are the illegal drugs of choice in Davidson County, not meth.

"We're seeing more activity where people are buying ephedrine packages in Davidson County, but we don't believe they are staying in Davidson County to cook the drug," Henry said. "I think they are coming in from surrounding counties and going place to place to buy the two-pack (limit)."

Then they return home, to places such as Williamson County, where officers are seeing an increase in meth labs.

In 2007, officers seized only one lab in Williamson County, but in 2008 it climbed to five.

Addictions increasing

Joey Kimble, director of the 21st Judicial District Drug Task Force, which includes Williamson, Hickman, Lewis and Perry counties, doesn't know why the Williamson County numbers are increasing, but it troubles him.

"Williamson County is not a place where you'd expect to see meth, and especially the increase we've seen," he said. "As low as it was before, and now seeing this increase, even with the change in the law, can only mean one thing. More people are becoming addicted in this county."

The lab busts, though small in number in the state's wealthiest county, demonstrate how no community is immune to the dangerous comeback.

"The main thing is that it drives the crime rate up," Kimble said. "A lot of addicts will steal from stores or homes to make sure that they have more of the drug. They'll do whatever it takes."

Compounding the problem is the new method manufacturers have created to make the drug.

It is commonly referred to as "shake and bake, one bottle or one pot," because of the simplicity of the procedure. The drug can be made in a 2-liter soft drink bottle, doesn't require an open flame for cooking, and takes about an hour to mix.

Older methods require an open flame and four to six hours of cooking.

In February, 40 percent to 60 percent of the drug labs seized by the TBI were using the one-pot method.

"Some of the ingredients used in the past are taken out or replaced in this method," Farmer said. "People need to watch out for these new products, which include batteries, particularly those containing lithium, Icy Cold packs, rubber tubing, duct tape, (camping) fuel or ether."

Police are watching, too.

They rely on tips from suspicious neighbors, and they monitor pharmacy records looking for trends in customer purchases.

Through the use of purchase information required by state law at the more than 2,000 pharmacies statewide, police can track pseudoephedrine sales and identify smurfers.

Most stores submit purchase records electronically, but some logs still have to be collected manually. Law officers say researching the records is labor-intensive but typically yields results.

"I think we are doing a much better job at going after these people and detecting them," Farmer said. "I know the numbers look bad, but we have got them on the run, and now is the time to apply more pressure."

Additional Facts

How illegal drugs compare

Methamphetamine

What is it: A white, odorless, bitter-tasting crystalline powder manufactured from common household ingredients

How it's used: snorted, injected, eaten and smoked

Common street names: Speed, meth, chalk, ice, crystal and glass

Cocaine

What is it: A white powder imported into the U.S. through Mexico from Colombia

How it's used: snorted, eaten or injected

Common street names: Coke, snow, flake and blow

Crack cocaine

What is it: Made from a mixture of cocaine, baking soda and water cooked in a microwave or on a stovetop

How it's used: smoked

Common street name: crack

Marijuana

What is it: A green, brown, or gray mixture of dried, shredded leaves, stems, seeds and flowers of the hemp plant

How it's used: smoked or eaten

Common street names: Pot, ganga, weed, grass and Mary Jane

Heroin

What is it: A drug imported from Mexico that is processed from morphine and usually appears as a white or brown powder

How it's used: mainly injected but can be snorted if it's high grade

Common street names: Smack, H, ska and junk

Sources: The National Institute on Drug Abuse, Metro Police Captain Todd Henry and 21st Judicial Task Force Director Joey Kimble
