

## Meth use receding in some regions

April 1, 2007

By: Martha Irvine

At one Minneapolis-area high school, the methamphetamine problem got so bad in recent years that staff members sometimes caught students trying to attend class while high.

But this year's been notably different, says Deborah Mosby, a high school drug counselor in Spring Lake Park, Minn.

It's a positive sign in a state that is one of many hard hit by the meth epidemic - and one of several early indications that a drug that's long been a scourge is losing its grip, at least in some communities.

Last year, federal officials and many states reported that the numbers of small "mom-and-pop" methamphetamine labs were dropping, a result largely attributed to the crackdown on the sale of pseudoephedrine and similar cold medicine ingredients used to make meth.

Officials feared that methamphetamine from Mexico would simply fill the void. And while authorities in some places have noticed an uptick in imported meth, others are hopeful that meth use is starting to wane.

Some examples:

- In Minnesota's Twin Cities, meth-related emergency room visits dropped from 1,402 in 2005 to 251 in 2006, according to a recent report by the nonprofit Hazelden Foundation.
- In Montana, a new report from that state's attorney general noted that meth-related crime fell 53 percent in 2006, compared with the previous year. They also found that, while meth remains a big problem there, the overall rate of employees in Montana who tested positive for meth was down more than 70 percent from 2005 to last year.
- In the San Francisco Bay area, meth-related emergency room visits leveled off in 2006, after peaking the previous two years. Decline in meth use has been particularly notable among gay men, following efforts in their community to spread the word about the drug's ill effects, says John Newmeyer, who heads San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury Free Clinics. In addition to causing paranoid, aggressive behavior, meth is known for its harsh physical effects - from sunken eyes and bone-thin frames to teeth that turn gray and deteriorate.

Newmeyer believes such effects have helped change attitudes about meth for "probably the same reasons we saw the decline 10 years ago with African-Americans and crack cocaine."

"It just became not the thing to do," says Newmeyer, who tracks his region's drug numbers for the federal government.

The news isn't good everywhere - especially on the East Coast, where meth became a problem more recently.

South Florida has, for instance, continued to see a steady increase in meth-related deaths, from 77 in 2003 to 115 last year. It's also more of an urban problem than a rural one, with much of the

meth coming from Mexico by way of Atlanta, says Jim Hall, executive director of the Up Front Drug Information Center in Miami.

Others have noted surges in use in the Hispanic community - and also the advent of strawberry and other flavored meth, aimed at renewing interest in the drug.

Still, for much of the country, researchers say it appears this latest meth epidemic reached its peak in 2004 and 2005.

Data from the federal government shows that the number of first-time meth users has steadily declined in recent years.

And Quest Diagnostics Inc. - a New Jersey company that maintains a national drug testing index based on millions of tests each year - found that 16 out of every 10,000 drug tests in the general work force came back positive for meth in 2006. That compares with 26 in 2005 and 33 the year before that.

While they still remain above the national average for overall positive tests for the amphetamine class of drugs, Idaho, Wyoming, New Mexico, Hawaii and Georgia saw the biggest drops in those positive tests, says Quest researcher Barry Sample.

Some law enforcement officials also are starting to feel less overwhelmed by methamphetamine - and, in some cases, seeing interest in the Mexican-made form of the drug decline.

"We expected a big switch (to Mexican meth) - and for a while there was," says Eric Schober, a police lieutenant with the criminal intelligence unit in Portland, Ore.

But in recent months, he says, he's seen the price of Mexican meth go up to more than \$1,000 an ounce, compared with \$600 to \$700 in the state's meth heyday.

He says the purity of that meth also has been cut from 90 percent to about 50 percent - perhaps a sign of a dwindling supply.

Meanwhile, he and others are seeing more interest in powder cocaine, which - like meth - is a dangerous stimulant.

Lisa Madigan, the state attorney general in Illinois, isn't ready to declare victory in her state but says the significant reduction in meth lab seizures has been a positive first step.

"There's simply a difference in the impact that the mom-and-pop labs have - in the cost to families and in cleaning them up," says Madigan, who has helped push drug stores to comply with pseudoephedrine limits in her state.

In addition to those types of laws, many experts say state and community efforts aimed at curbing meth use also have been key.

They include the Montana Meth Project, a public service campaign with stark, edgy ads that depict the horrors of meth. Some critics view the approach as one-dimensional.

"They see a dollar spent on prevention as a dollar not spent on enforcement. But it's all important," says Tom Siebel, the project's founder and main funder.

The Montana attorney general's report credits the program with helping change attitudes about meth - and cites a survey in which 93 percent of Montana students considered meth a "great risk."

Elsewhere, residents are taking it upon themselves to fight meth, including in the Dodge Flower and Dodge Oak neighborhoods in Tucson, Ariz., where the theme is "Meth Get Outta Dodge."

They recently sponsored a workshop for the neighborhoods' many landlords to teach them how to do tenant background checks, legal property inspections and immediate evictions for criminal activity.

"We still have a meth problem; it hasn't cured it," says Barbara Lehmann, president of the Dodge Flower neighborhood association. "But I do feel hopeful. I mean, I'm still living in the neighborhood, right?"