

21 December 2007 13:46

- [Home](#)
- > [News](#)
- > [World](#)
- > [Americas](#)

Drug dependency in the US: The Crystal Craze

Across the mountains and prairies of America, a generation of young people is falling victim to methamphetamine addiction and state authorities are struggling to cope. By Andrew Buncombe

Published: 21 April 2006

Even when she was stealing money from her nine-year-old niece to fund her habit Sarah Bright was certain she did not have a problem with methamphetamine. When she got up in the middle of the night and paranoically wandered around her garden, convinced that FBI agents were stalking her, she thought she was in control. She did not have a problem with drugs, she told herself. Everything was cool.

Today, two years after she first experimented with the drug and four months since she last indulged in a habit that had taken over her life, the teenager thinks differently. "Once you start taking drugs you turn into a nasty, horrible person," she said. "I treated people like crap. My only goal was to get money to get meth."

If Sarah sounds like the poster child in a drug prevention campaign that's because she is. The 17-year-old from Missoula is one of handful of young people featured in a new series of anti-meth advertisements launched this week in Montana where authorities are struggling to deal with the highly addictive and destructive drug that has become the scourge of rural America.

Much more so than cocaine, crack, heroin or marijuana, smalltown USA is steadily falling prey to a drug more commonly known as crank, glass or crystal. Originally produced using over-the-counter medication containing ephedrine bought from "mom and pop" drug stores, use of the drug has steadily increased, with production taken over by "super-labs" in Mexico and trafficked by Hispanic gangs.

The Big Sky state of Montana, famed for its mountains and sweeping prairies, is one of the front lines in the effort to combat the drug. In the 10 years from 1992, the number of people admitted for meth addiction in the state jumped by 520 per cent. Today, in places such as Missoula where Norman MacLean set his haunting novella *A River Runs Through It*, later made into a movie by Robert Redford and starring Brad Pitt, 9.3 per cent of teenagers say they have tried the drug, compared to a national average of 6.3 per cent.

Easy to make, cheap to buy and with an initial soaring energising "high" some users have likened to "having 10 orgasms at once", meth has found ready users among teenagers as well as young mothers with children looking to get through a busy day. Its ability to suppress appetite and help weight-loss has lured many young women to experiment. Meth can cost as little as \$25 for quarter-gram and unlike any other drug, it is estimated that 50 per cent of meth users are women. "I was 15. It was lunchtime and a friend asked if I had ever done dope," says Caitlin Moe, 22, another former addict featured in the campaign.

"I asked what it would make me do and she said it would help me study really hard and give me energy. It sounded great. We snorted it and it did all those things. It made me feel on top of the world. I studied hard for the rest of the day. [But] from then on I had to have it all of the time."

Caitlin struggled with meth addiction for three years, lying to her parents, failing at school, losing friends. Having once quit and joined an outpatient drugs prevention programme, she started smoking meth the day the programme ended.

She eventually gave up after attending a boot camp in Utah, but even now she feels the temptation to try it again. "You became an excellent manipulator and liar, just so you can continue to use it" she said. "I did not think I had a problem. I could justify everything I did."

In Montana, the impact of meth on crime and health care is vast and is getting worse; 85 per cent of women inmates in the state prison are there because of meth-related crime, 70 per cent of the state's drug crimes are meth-related, and the number of people being admitted for treatment has increased by 70 per cent over the past six years.

Indeed, the scale of meth-related crime is such that the state's Department of Corrections has just approved the building of two new "meth prisons". There will be an 80-inmate unit for men and a 40-inmate unit for women. Some of the worst problems have been seen in the state's Native American reservations where authorities say fewer police, the wide dispersal of residents and higher than usual poverty levels have helped produce a meth crisis.

The Montana Governor, Brian Schweitzer, recently told *The New York Times*: "It's destroying families, it's destroying our schools, it's destroying our budgets for corrections, social services [and] health care. We're losing a generation of productive people."

Montana's efforts to tackle meth have been funded by Thomas Siebel, a Silicon Valley billionaire, who spent much of his youth in the state and owns ranches there. He was told of the impact of the drug on law and order resources by the state's attorney general and decided to donate \$5.6m (£3.1m) to fund a prevention campaign. The Montana Meth Project was born.

Taking its cue from professional advertising, the campaign commissioned focus-group studies of young people and discovered 43 per cent believed there were "benefits" associated with meth use, be it weight loss, additional energy or enhanced concentration. The result has been a television, radio and billboard and print campaign featuring a striking images and films.

One billboard advert in the state capital, Helena, shows a filthy public toilet with the message, "No one thinks they'll lose their virginity here. Meth will change that". One of the television adverts, which all feature actors, show a young woman plucking out all of her eyebrows, apparently unaware of what she is doing and oblivious to the pain.

Perhaps most striking are the 30-second radio clips by former addicts such as Sarah and Caitlin talking of their experiences. In her clip, Caitlin tells of the after-effects of one meth binge. "I felt like if I even moved an inch I would have a heart attack. My heart was beating so fast."

The campaign is the only state-wide prevention campaign in the nation and is being closely monitored by local authorities across the US also struggling to confront the problem.

It has become the biggest advertiser in the state and an estimated 90 per cent of children between the ages of 12 and 17 see the adverts three times a week.

Montana is a vast space that is home to just 900,000 residents, the third most sparsely populated US state after Alaska and Wyoming. Peg Shea, executive director of the Montana Meth Project, said isolation and ignorance of the drug's dangers contributed to the problem. "Also this is the West," she said, as she drove to a public meeting in the Salish-Kootenai reservation town of Polson. "The people who came here were pioneers. They take risks."

The road passed through the broad Missoula valley where spring will burst forth in weeks, filling the landscape with wildflowers. On the north side of the valley stood the snow-capped Mission Mountains. Did she think part of the problem with Montana's youth was boredom? "That's what the children tell us," she said. "Our campaign aims to have a knee-jerk reaction among kids so they don't even want to try it, to try and make it [produce a similar reaction] as heroin."

At the town meeting, the tribal police authority chief, Craig Couture, told how his officers devoted much of their time to handling meth dealers and addicts. And he spoke from personal experience; his younger brother was addicted to methamphetamine for years. Today he is clean. "There was a time when I told him I go was going to send him to prison. I told every police officer he was an addict. At the time he hated me. He told me I was going to find him dead."

Shaden, a 28-year-old member of the Salish-Kootenai tribe, is living in a treatment centre for women addicts in Missoula. She has three children by different fathers and she had taken meth for more than eight years, often injecting it. She stopped a few months ago. Her eyes looked dark and her body still twitched, something known among treatment experts as "tweaking".

She said she had grown up in a family where most of her relatives used meth and other drugs. "The worst thing is that you are so blind in your reality. You know in the back of your head not to take it. In the end I had no self worth, no self-esteem. I knew nothing was going to get better. I had to get away from my family. I was praying and crying."

Methamphetamine, synthesised in 1919 and closely related to the drug amphetamine, was given to troops during the Second World War as a stimulant. It sharply stimulates the central nervous system in a similar way to adrenalin, releasing large quantities of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is responsible for controlling movement, thought processes, emotions, and the pleasure centres of the brain.

Aside from the addiction, a downside of long-term meth use is that it damages those neuro-transmitters, making it harder for recovering addicts to experience pleasure. The cold turkey is very cold indeed.

Dr John Nautts, a specialist in addictive medicine with the West Montana Addiction Services, said users often suffered depression when they stop taking meth. "We try and treat this with antidepressants," he said. "[It also affects] memory and word recall." The drug is also a libido stimulant and several years ago there was great concern among sections of the gay community, especially in New York and San Francisco, that "crystal" abuse was responsible for a spike in HIV infection rates.

But the effects of meth abuse have struck hardest in the American heartland. In Oklahoma and Illinois, authorities have had to dramatically expand child support services to handle the numbers of "meth orphans" created by the arrest or imprisonment of addict parents.

Michael Walther, director of the National Drug Intelligence Centre (NDIC), said: "Over the past 10 years, methamphetamine trafficking and abuse has devastated individuals, families, and communities in western and midwestern states and has now spread eastward to nearly every area of the country. Addressing the challenges presented by this highly addictive drug, including laboratory cleanup, treatment for methamphetamine dependency, frequent child neglect, and other methamphetamine-related crimes, has greatly depleted state and local law enforcement and public health resources."

The National Association of Counties says it is the biggest problem facing local authorities yet some campaigners say the federal government is not sufficiently addressing the issue. They say that while meth addiction is rampant in rural areas considered the bedrock of Republican support, Washington has been slow to act because the drug has not yet taken such a hold in east coast cities.

In Montana the biggest danger may be ignorance. Sarah, the young woman from the advertisements, said there had been no education about meth in her school. When she first took it she had no idea what she was getting into. She said: "I did not even get told what meth was."

[Interesting? Click here to explore further](#)