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Resurgence of Meth Labs in Arizona Feared Mexico's crackdown expected to cause production to rise in Ariz.

By: JJ Hensley

Arizona's efforts to eradicate meth production, largely through local ordinances restricting sales of drugs containing pseudoephedrine, have proved successful over the past five years. The number of labs seized in the state plummeted from more than 200 in 2002 to fewer than a dozen in 2007 as manufacturers moved operations to Mexico. But those efforts didn't do much to curb demand in the state, and with Mexican authorities continuing their own push to limit the availability of pseudoephedrine, Arizona experts expect lab seizures in the state to start climbing again.

"The small labs are beginning to come back," Attorney General Terry Goddard said. "I see it come across my desk almost every day."

With the labs come increased costs for the state and local agencies that cope with the drug's fallout. A recent survey from a drug-policy research group pinned meth's annual costs to the United States at more than \$24 billion. The total includes estimates of costs on social services, health care, law enforcement and lost productivity, according to RAND, the research group that conducted the study. Although the \$24 billion tab is staggering, Arizona experts say the real cost could be higher because the total fails to include costs associated with crimes such as identity theft and the expense of cleaning up labs.

A series of local ordinances, law-enforcement efforts and public-relations campaigns have altered the landscape of meth's supply and use in Arizona. The local measures began popping up in the mid-2000s, when Arizona communities began enacting ordinances that restrict the sale of pseudoephedrine, the drug's key ingredient. More than 40 Arizona cities and towns have such laws.

Rep. Eric Meyer, D-Paradise Valley, is sponsoring legislation to expand those restrictions statewide, giving authorities more ammunition to go after meth producers. They'll need it.

As more meth labs pop up in Arizona, authorities are recognizing a new trend. This time, the manufacture and distribution of the drug is in the hands of complex and violent drug-trafficking organizations, instead of the "mom-and-pop bathtub operations" investigators used to find.

Lt. Steve Bailey, an investigator with the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office said that although still in homes, labs are large and elaborate. "Meth is harder to make than anything else. It creates more waste, you need more people,

more time, more resources, but to most of those (dealers), it's worth it. At \$17,000 per pound - that's the retail price in Phoenix - they're doubling their money at least," Bailey said.

Crimes could climb

With the increase in labs, experts expect meth-related crime to climb:

Property crime: Half of all burglary arrests in the state are meth-related, according to Goddard's office.

More than 40 percent of inmates booked for property crimes tested positive for meth in a 2008 study. Investigators like Bailey say those totals are low: "Every tweak house we go to . . . they got stolen property everywhere. You name it, it's there."

- **Abuse cases:** Goddard's office conducted a survey in 2006 that identified meth as a "probable cause" of violence against children in 65 percent of the cases that year.

More than 70 percent of abuse-and-neglect cases that come in to Child Protective Services are meth-related, Goddard said.

- **Identity theft:** Arizona still leads the nation in reported identity thefts, and investigators have tied meth and ID theft, largely based on anecdotal evidence that both the buyers and sellers need capital to purchase and manufacture the product.

Stolen identities are easy money for meth users, Bailey said, and the drug organizations can sell them for cash. For all of law enforcement's efforts to rein in Arizona's meth problem, manufacturers and users have still found ways to skirt the laws.

Positive news

The answer, said Amy Rex, with the Arizona Meth Project, is to try to quell demand. That's part of the thinking behind the project, part of a national program to discourage first-time users. In that regard, there is some good news.

The project established baseline data in April 2007, before launching its campaign. A youth survey one year later found that the numbers of first-time users in eighth, 10th and 12th grades had been cut in half. "The positive aspects had been downplayed and replaced by the realization that this is a very dangerous drug," Rex said. "Instead of causing you to lose weight, it will cause you to lose teeth."