



Research Bulletin

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The impact of methamphetamine on Illinois communities: An ethnography

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Methamphetamine is emerging as the drug of choice in many rural towns across the Midwest. And while drug abuse in rural Illinois communities is not a new phenomenon, methamphetamine abuse is growing at an alarming rate. The amount of methamphetamine seized in Illinois rose tenfold from 1994 to 2004, according to the Illinois State Police. In addition, local support

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services are faced with problems stemming from methamphetamine abuse that are usually not associated with the use of other drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and alcohol.

Recognizing the need to further investigate the growing problem

of methamphetamine in east-central Illinois, the Authority commissioned a study by Ralph Weisheit, Ph.D., of Illinois State University. This *Research Bulletin* reviews “The Impact of Methamphetamine on Illinois Communities: An Ethnography,” conducted by Weisheit, who examined the impact of methamphetamine in Edgar and Clark counties. Interviews were conducted of command personnel of various public service agencies that serve the citizens of these two counties. Individuals interviewed included those working for all aspects of the criminal justice system, emergency first responders, social service agencies, schools, and local businesses.

What is methamphetamine?

Methamphetamine is a potent stimulant that affects the central nervous system. Its effects are similar to cocaine and include an increase in wakefulness, alertness, and energy. In contrast to cocaine’s brief high, a methamphetamine high lasts for several hours. The powerful pleasure of a methamphetamine high coupled with the extreme depression of withdrawal from the drug makes meth extremely addictive.



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Weisheit asserts that due to these extreme highs and lows, following methamphetamine rehab treatment, relapse appears to be the norm .

Juxtaposed with the production and distribution of other illicit drugs, methamphetamine offers benefits not normally available to an illicit drug manufacturer. Methamphetamine is produced on site in improvised mobile labs with materials that can be purchased at local stores. Conversely, cocaine, which is produced from plant leaves, requires a large and complex production and distribution network.

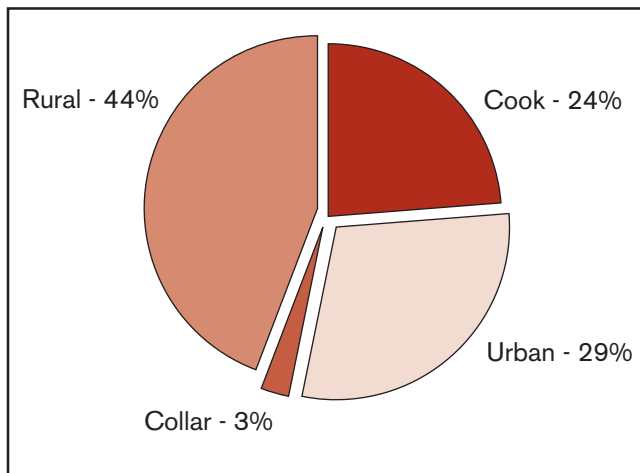
County profiles

Edgar County and Clark County are adjoined along the Illinois-Indiana border. Both possess similar demographic characteristics and share many social services. Edgar County has a population of 19,000. Clark County has a population of 17,000. Both counties show unemployment figures below the state average. Agriculture industry is prevalent in the area, with anhydrous ammonia (a key ingredient in both the production of methamphetamine and a fertilizer of cash crops in both counties) widely used in both counties. Edgar and Clark counties share a public defender as well as the services of the Human Resources Center, the primary provider of social services to both counties.

Edgar and Clark counties also share another unique bond. To the east of Edgar and Clark counties is Vigo County, Ind., identified as the Indiana county with the largest number of seized methamphetamine labs. To the west is Coles County, which is identified as having the largest number of seized methamphetamine labs in Illinois.

There does not appear to be an established local trade of methamphetamine in Edgar and Clark counties. Instead, an informal barter system has developed which facilitates the consumption and production of the drug. For example, a “cook” will agree to provide methamphetamine to a group of people. In return, the cook’s accomplices will agree to steal or obtain the ingredients necessary to make a batch. The absence of a cash flow in the methamphetamine business has made it difficult for law enforcement to seize any property of value.

Figure 1
Methamphetamine seized by region
in state fiscal year 2004



Source: Illinois State Police

Portrait of a methamphetamine user

A Clark County judge offered a portrait of a typical methamphetamine user:

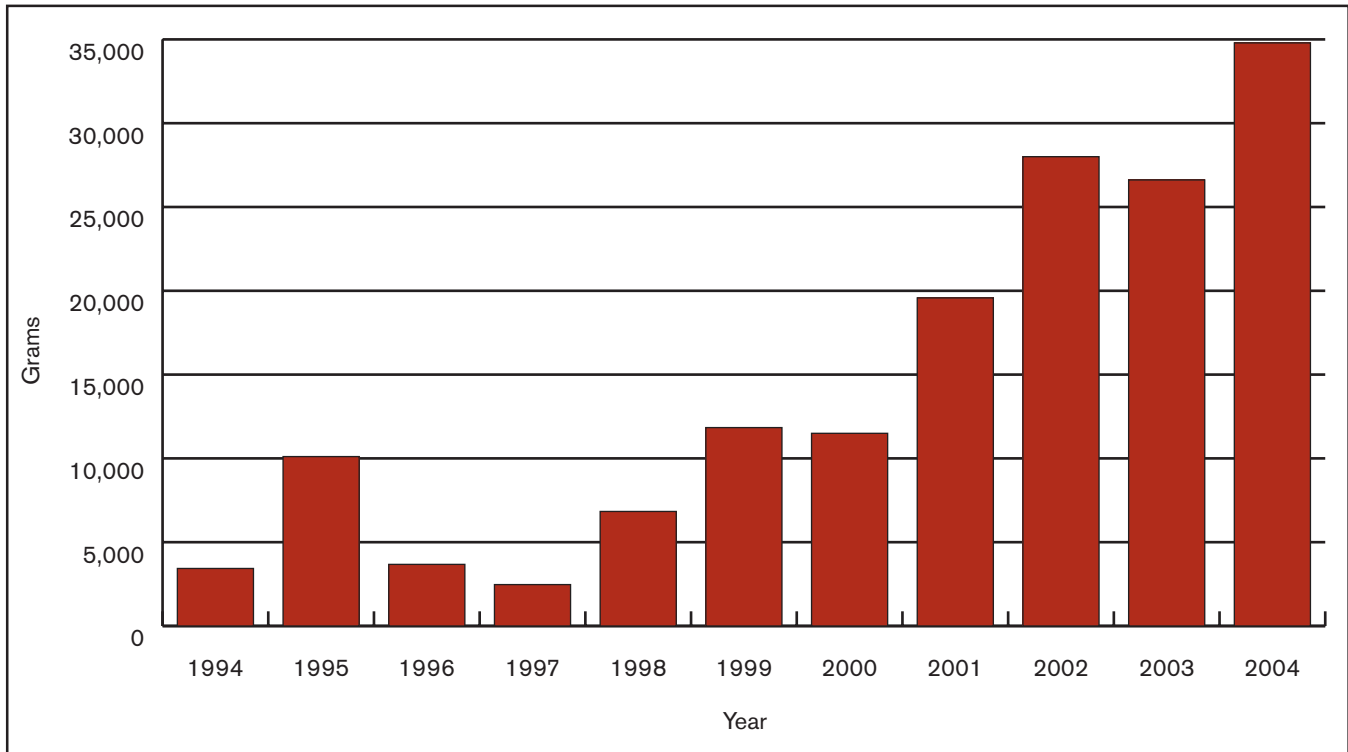
- Methamphetamine users and producers are typically in groups of three to five people when arrested.
- Females account for a higher number of those arrested for methamphetamine use.
- Often a husband and wife, or boyfriend and girlfriend, are arrested at the same time.
- Methamphetamine use is spread out among all age groups.
- Methamphetamine users have an infrequent history of work.

The study also found that people arrested for methamphetamine are often carrying a firearm. A judge who was interviewed for the study indicated those arrested for marijuana or cocaine in Edgar and Clark counties typically do not have a firearm in their possession at the time of arrest.

Methamphetamine’s impact on Edgar and Clark county’s criminal justice systems

Seizure of methamphetamine labs in Illinois rose dramatically from 24 in 1997 to more than 1,000 in 2003, but researchers suggest that the number of labs is probably undercounted. While Clark County is

Figure 2
Grams of methamphetamine seized in rural Illinois counties in state fiscal years 1994 to 2004



Source: Illinois State Police

covered by a drug task force run by the Illinois State Police, Edgar County is not.

According to law enforcement personnel interviewed for this study, arrests for methamphetamine use have almost tripled since the first labs were raided in the late 1990s. In 2003, of 366 felony arrests in Edgar County, 145 of those were for methamphetamine.

As methamphetamine arrests increase, one unexpected effect of the methamphetamine trade is the cost absorbed by law enforcement in housing prisoners. In addition to jail overcrowding, those arrested for methamphetamine have unique health issues, dental problems in particular. According to the Clark County Sheriff's Department, in fiscal year 2003, the county jail had a medical budget of \$30,000, but spent \$60,000 on medical costs associated with prisoners.

Methamphetamine use is taking a toll on emergency first responders in Edgar and Clark counties as well. Waste produced from manufacturing methamphetamine is toxic, and there is a risk of fire from exploding labs and hazardous materials that remain from the operation of a lab. In addition to the emergency itself,

first responders to a methamphetamine lab site, or former site, must cope with contaminated air, toxic groundwater, and discarded syringes that are all by-products of abandoned methamphetamine labs.

Emergency medical technicians in the two counties are being trained in self-defense techniques in response to calls for people suffering the effects of methamphetamine. Medically, nothing can be done for a person coming down from a methamphetamine high. Abusers experiencing the effects of withdrawal become agitated, paranoid, and sometimes violent.

Schools in Edgar and Clark counties

The study indicated that methamphetamine use is gaining a foothold in the schools. In an attempt to gauge student awareness of methamphetamine, the principal of a local junior high school asked sixth grade students to draw a picture of methamphetamine. Four students drew a picture of a methamphetamine lab, which may have indicated exposure to the drug.

Educators inform the students about the dangers of methamphetamine use in addition to the dangers of the hazardous materials in the lab. A local health

department asked by the school to give a presentation about hygiene and safety around the home included additional information about the dangers of methamphetamine trash.

According to an educator interviewed for the study, parents who abuse methamphetamine hinder the social development of their children. Meth-addicted parents are typically up all night, which could lead to children losing sleep as well. Children of meth addicts also tended to have trouble developing positive interpersonal relationships with their peers.

Business

Methamphetamine has had a harmful effect on the business community of Edgar and Clark counties. In addition to the loss of goods that are stolen to produce methamphetamine, the inability to staff vacant job positions in the counties has hampered business growth. Due to stringent drug testing policies, employers in Edgar and Clark counties are reporting that they are struggling to fill vacant positions because potential employees are failing drug tests. Employers choosing not to perform drug tests run the possibility of creating a safety problem at the workplace by hiring workers who may be using methamphetamine.

The agriculture industry in Edgar and Clark counties has also been affected by methamphetamine. Farms in the area are large and farmers are unable to supervise such vast, isolated spaces. Unsupervised farmland attracts meth labs. Meth producers often abandon the toxic remains of a lab in and around crops, leaving farmers to clean up a contaminated toxic dump site. Farmers also reported damage to large farm equipment that has inadvertently run over a vacated methamphetamine lab.

Community response in Edgar and Clark counties

Community members in the two counties have formed a grass roots organization in response to the growing methamphetamine problem. In 2001, three residents of the two counties formed the Coalition Against Methamphetamine Abuse (CAMA). CAMA has been successful in raising awareness of methamphetamine and promoting a legislative agenda regarding methamphetamine. CAMA has also developed a good relationship

between the business, criminal justice, and social service agencies in the counties.

Steps to control methamphetamine use

Interview respondents were asked what could be done to bring the methamphetamine problem under control. Prevention and specialized treatment for the methamphetamine user were suggested as a way to curtail methamphetamine use. But, respondents also indicated they are resigned to the problem. No matter what was done, respondents felt that the methamphetamine problem would not go away or diminish anytime soon. More resources are needed to contain the problem, but respondents are painfully aware of the dwindling amount of funds that are available to support these efforts.

Conclusion

The study of the impact of methamphetamine use in Edgar and Clark counties illustrates how the drug touches every segment of the community – from family members of the addicted person, to police who deal directly with the addicts, and farmers who must police vast acres of their farms for damage done by methamphetamine users. Methamphetamine use even affects the homeowner who must live with a reduction in community services in order to finance other initiatives that respond to the spreading problem.

There are no easy answers in dealing with methamphetamine use, but members of the communities involved have united in an effort to contain the problem. Local leaders are tapping into the limited resources available, and drawing on the skills of other community members to provide education, treatment, and a host of other services to address the issue. But with the ease of production and the intense cheap highs of methamphetamine use, methamphetamine will continue to be a popular drug.