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Meth monster alive, thriving in Georgia

By [Andria Simmons](#)

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Three young children who died following a fire in their mother's home in Lilburn on Thursday appear to be the latest casualties in Georgia's emerging methamphetamine epidemic.

Police said the youngsters were living amid a cache of toxic and highly volatile chemicals -- the kind used to manufacture meth -- when something sparked the fatal fire that torched four pounds of the drug.



Gwinnett County Fire PIO Tommy Rutledge (left) and Gwinnett County police PIO corporal J.L. Smith hold a press conference in front of the house where three children were burned to death.

Bystanders, some of whom may have been relatives, used a ladder to extricate the children from a second floor of a two-story house on Spring Mill Drive, according to Gwinnett fire Capt. Tommy Rutledge. But by Friday morning, the two boys, Isaac Guevara, 4, and Ivan Guevara, 3, and a girl, 18-month-old Stacy Brito, had died of severe burns and smoke inhalation.

[Gwinnett County](#) police have filed murder charges against a fugitive who lived in the home, Ivan Gonzalez. The childrens'

mother, Neibi Brito, also has been charged with trafficking in methamphetamine.

"This is a typical home in a typical neighborhood, a very tragic situation and we hope to bring this situation to justice," said Rutledge.

The meth monster is alive and thriving in Georgia, as the Lilburn calamity well illustrates.

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, the amount of methamphetamine seized in the state has soared from 51 kilograms in 2008 to 279 kilograms in 2010, a whopping 447 percent increase. And so far this year, authorities have already confiscated 575 kilos.

Most meth available in the Atlanta area is still produced in Mexico and smuggled over the border, according to Chuvalo Truesdell, a spokesman for the DEA office in Atlanta.

However, local meth production sites like the lab in Lilburn are popping up more often.



The number of methamphetamine lab incidents reported in Georgia over the past three years has climbed from 167 to 257, a 54 percent increase. Meth lab incidents are defined as the discovery of any type or size of meth lab or area where meth-making materials are dumped.

That includes small batches of the drug cooked using the increasingly popular "one-pot" method, by combining a few household items with cold pills in a 2-liter bottle.

"I'm afraid what we're seeing is our fears are being realized," said Fred Stephens, an inspector for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. "Our meth problem is not going away."

Lyndsey Johnson, 25, of Flowery Branch, is all too familiar with the temptation.

She started using meth at age 15. Within two years, the spirited girl who had a college softball scholarship at Brenau University and was on her way to a pre-med degree in biology had become a full-blown "meth head." She bounced from one friend's couch to another, her life a dizzying blur centered around one thing: getting high.

"It all just went to nothing," said Johnson, who has since found recovery through the [Gwinnett County](#) Drug Court Program. "I work at a chicken plant now. I never finished school, never had anything to show for the last eight years at all."

There are battles waging on several fronts to combat methamphetamine abuse.

At the start of the year, the GBI began using a new database called the Georgia Methamphetamine Intelligence System (GMIS) to track purchases of pseudoephedrine, a decongestant that is a key ingredient in meth.

A change in state law in 2005 put the medication, which is marketed as Sudafed and Claritin-D, behind the counter. It also placed restrictions on the amount that one person could buy and required purchasers to show ID and sign a log book.

However, more people have found ways to skirt the law in recent years by going from store-to-store and using fake IDs to amass larger quantities of the cold pills, Stephens said.

GMIS is aimed at thwarting those people, but it has significant limitations. It only tracks data that is voluntarily provided by the larger pharmacy chains. The GBI hopes it can at least serve as a jumping-off point for police investigations.

Within the first 30 days of operating GMIS and using data from only one pharmacy chain, the GBI identified 126 people who had purchased more than the legal limit of nine grams in a 30-day period. Some individuals had purchased as much as 100 grams in a month, Stephens said.

The GBI is working to expand the database to include other pharmacies' information. The database will be made available to local law enforcement, who will be offered training on how to use it, Stephens said.

State lawmakers are also considering a bill that would make pseudoephedrine a Class 5 drug. Doing so would keep medicines like Sudafed available over the counter, but make them available only in pharmacies, not convenience stores, said State Rep. Buddy Harden, R-Cordele, who is also pharmacist.

Pseudoephedrine would also become subject to tracking with the passage of a separate bill that would create a prescription drug monitoring program. The program would include an electronic database similar to



GMIS. But unlike GMIS, which is a voluntary participation system, all pharmacies would be required to submit records of drugs they dispense to the prescription drug monitoring system.

Personal information associated with the prescriptions would not be subject to the Open Records Act to ensure patient privacy. Police would have to secure a subpoena to access the database, which would be administered by the state Composite Medical Board. The GBI, DEA and Georgia Drug and Narcotics Agency support the creation of a prescription drug monitoring program. Thirty-four other states have similar databases.

As authorities work on the supply-side of the problem, a privately funded public education campaign is aimed at diminishing the demand for meth.

The Georgia Meth Project rolled out a series of jarring commercials last year aimed at deterring youngsters from trying the drug. The campaign is called "Not Even Once."

Recognizing that meth had become the fastest-growing drug problem in Atlanta, Dalton and Gainesville over the previous five years, the project seeks to change the attitudes of young people who believe there is no harm in experimenting.

A survey conducted last year found that a third of Georgia teens saw little to no risk in trying methamphetamine and a fifth of them said it was easy to get.

Jim Langford, the executive director of the Georgia Meth Project, said a new survey is currently being conducted to determine if the attitudes of young adults have changed since the ad campaign began. The survey results will be released in April.

Langford said organizers have been hearing positive responses from the public about the commercials since they began airing last spring.

"We don't know if we're going to see an immediate first-year impact, but we hope so," said Langford, who added the project has had success in seven other states where it has been established. "What we hope is that if we dampen the demand side, then that helps dry up the market."

Johnson will be one less customer. Now clean for almost two years, the 25-year-old is set to graduate from [Gwinnett County](#) Drug Court, a four-stage intervention program, in June. She wants to go back to college and start her life over. And she knows better than to try using again.

"I think you can be addicted off one hit, for sure," Johnson said. "I always tell my little sister don't even do it one time."