

The Augusta Chronicle

Meth labs increasing statewide

More portable production adds to drug's popularity, police say

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Saturday, March 12, 2011

In the past three years, Augusta saw a 79 percent increase in the number of methamphetamine labs found by police.

Georgia saw an 82 percent increase.

"We've been on a surge recently," said Richmond County sheriff's Sgt. Allan Rollins. "(The labs are) getting much more portable and easier to carry. It used to be you almost had to have a high school chemistry laboratory to make, but now you can basically make it out of a suitcase in a jar."

Only about 20 percent of Georgia's methamphetamine is made in-state. The majority of meth is coming from Mexico, said Douglas Kahn, a Drug Enforcement Administration spokesman in Atlanta. Labs are then set up locally to extract the crystal meth from the solution.

"Atlanta has become the distribution hub for meth," said Jim Langford, the executive director of the Georgia Meth Project

Users are drawn to the drug's high, estimated to be five times more powerful than cocaine, and relatively low cost. The effects can last six to 12 hours, whereas cocaine's high typically last only 45 minutes.

"It's easy to ingest," Langford said. "You can snort it or smoke it or inject it, and that's sort of the progression. But you can also put it in a soft drink or in chewing gum."

Langford said this was why teens were drawn to the drug.

In terms of teenage users, Langford said, Georgia has the third-worst meth problem in the United States.

A poll conducted a year ago by the Georgia Meth Project found that 35 percent of teens and young adults thought there was no risk in trying the drug. Twenty-three percent said they believed it would be beneficial.

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On meth, the body produces 10-12 times more dopamine than it does for other pleasurable activities, but over time, the receptors in the brain burn out, making it harder to experience pleasure.

Users can stay awake for three to six days at a time. Because of itching caused by the shrinking of capillaries, they will sometimes cut into their skin and attempt to dig out the insects they believe are crawling under it. Users will also begin to develop "meth mouth," a condition where the gums and teeth begin to rot away from the hazardous chemicals ingested.

"It's a lifestyle that's hard for the average Georgian to understand," he said. "It's almost like a vampire culture that you hear or read about in the newspaper, but it's a real lifestyle."

Only about five percent of users are able to kick their habits completely, Langford said.

"Methamphetamine is such an addictive drug that it's probably one of the hardest drugs to treat," said Terry Childers, the community representative for Bradford Health Services.

Childers said because there is no detoxification for the drug, breaking a meth addiction can prove extremely difficult.

Patients will typically spend about two to three weeks in inpatient care before moving toward an intensive outpatient treatment.

"We tell them you have to change one thing, and that's everything," Childers said.

Meth is estimated to cost Georgia \$1.3 billion a year. The amount includes costs such as health care, incarceration and foster care.

"The list goes on and on," Langford said.

Meth labs

AUGUSTA

2008: 14

2009: 18

2010: 25

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ATLANTA

2008: 164

2009: 165

2010: 299

Sources: Richmond County Sheriff's Office, Drug Enforcement Administration

A toxic high

For every pound of meth produced, approximately five pounds of toxic waste is generated. It is often found dumped roadside, in bodies of water or in the woods.

Ingredients in meth:

- Ephedrine or pseudoephedrine found in many over-the-counter medications
- Acetone (nail polish remover)
- Iodine
- Anhydrous ammonia
- Hydrochloric acid (pool chemicals)
- Lithium (batteries)
- Red phosphorus (matches or road flares)
- Sodium hydroxide (lye)
- Sulfuric acid (drain cleaner)
- Toluene (brake fluid)

Source: Georgia Meth Project