

Chattanooga Times Free Press

FOR THE LATEST NEWS THROUGHOUT THE DAY, GO TO TIMESFREEPRESS.COM

day, May 8, 2009 • Vol. 140, No. 145 • • • •

To GIVE THE NEWS IMPARTIALLY, WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOR

© 2009 Chattanooga Times Free Press

Meth, lab seizures on rise

Tennessee labs find way around drug regulations

Online: Hear Larry Black talk about meth lab seizures. Read previous stories. Comment.

By JACQUELINE KOCH
JKOCH@TIMESFREEPRESS.COM

A year ago, state law enforcement officials touted a four-year decline in the number of methamphetamine lab seizures, citing aggressive narcotics policing, restrictive laws and community awareness campaigns.

But they warned that meth manufacturers would find new ways to get their fixes.

And they did. The number of meth lab seizures across Tennessee exploded in 2008, up to 815 from 583 in 2007, an increase of almost 40 percent. The number of labs seized was the highest since 1,201 in 2005, according to the Tennessee Methamphetamine Task Force.

The increase can be attributed to more people making meth by using faster and cheaper methods and increased vigilance on the part of law enforcement to find and confiscate labs, officials said.

Lab seizures in Hamilton County also increased from 23 in 2007 to 32 in 2008.

Those numbers won't decline any time soon, and authorities are on target to seize even more labs in 2009. Through March



STAFF FILE PHOTO BY BRETT CLARK

Materials removed from one of the largest methamphetamine labs found in Southeast Tennessee are lined up outside the residence. Sequatchie County Sheriff Ronnie Hitchcock said the lab was 10 times larger than any other he had seen.

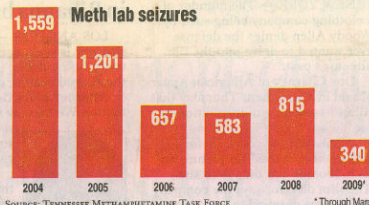
of this year, 340 labs have been seized statewide and more than 1,300 are expected by year's end, officials said.

In Hamilton County, authorities have confiscated 22 labs, including 17 in March, putting them on pace for 88, according to task force data.

"It's not necessarily all a bad thing," said Lt. Tommy Farmer, head of the Tennessee Methamphetamine Task Force. "That is good law enforcement, good

intelligence. It's efficient use of what we're doing out there." The increase also speaks to the resourcefulness of meth manufacturers.

"(The increase) identifies the mobility, the ingenuity of some of the meth manufacturers to be pretty creative, jumping both city and state boundaries," he said. "They're traveling long distances to simply acquire the necessary precursors (chemi-



SOURCE: TENNESSEE METHAMPHETAMINE TASK FORCE

*Through March
STAFF GRAPHIC BY BECK TOWERY

See METH, Page A9

GRADES ARE I

Among major banks with operations in Georgia and South Tennessee:

- SunTrust, Chattanooga's big bank, needs \$2.2 billion
- Regions, No. 3 in metro Chattanooga needs \$2.5 billion
- Bank of America needs \$33.9 billion
- Wells Fargo, which acquired Wachovia in December, needs \$100 billion

Source: Federal Reserve

SunTrust Region 'stressed' banks

Online: See previous stories.

STAFF AND WIRE REPORT
Four banks will operations in the Chattanooga region, including the most area branch to raise more money from the government said Thursday.

INSIDERS
Among bank officials, the 19 biggest financial services companies test how they could handle economic stress, the Reserve found 10 were equitably capitalized. tively, the government

See STRESS, Pa

Meth

Continued from Page A1
cals)."

METH TRENDS

Meth initially was introduced to cities much like other drugs — from Mexico. But users soon learned to make it with household items, eliminating the need for distribution and for them to travel into inner cities, said Lt. Van Hinton, head of the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office narcotics division.

"It ended up being housed because you didn't have a lot of people traveling or buying or dealing with the Mexicans because they were just doing it mom-and-pop," Lt. Hinton said. "The distribution was stagnant as far as the meth coming from the Mexicans, because everybody's cooking their own."

But when federal law required valid IDs for the sale of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine with the Combat Meth Act of 2005, communities experienced a resurgence of Mexican meth, he said.

Overall, fewer people obtained meth ingredients so fewer people made meth, and law enforcement officials cracked down on purchases, all combining to create a decrease in meth lab seizures, he said.

Under the Meth Free Tennessee Act of 2005, pharmacists must keep records of who purchases meth precursors such as pseudoephedrine. To further fight meth, Tennessee took another step and created an electronic database that monitors in real time all purchases of pseudoephedrine.

Pharmacies are prohibited from selling more than three

SEIZURES BY COUNTY

	2006	2007	2008
Bradley	16	34	11
Grundy	22	6	3
Hamilton	54	23	32
Marion	37	9	6
McMinn	26	28	55
Meigs	11	8	7
Rhea	4	4	1
Sequatchie	8	5	12

Source: Tennessee Methamphetamine Task Force

individual packages of any nonexempt product to the same person, according to the act.

But homemade meth didn't disappear. Users instead found other ways to manufacture meth, leading to a rise in "shake and bake" labs. While meth labs once used coffee pots, elaborate piping and an open flame, shake and bake labs use only rubber tubing and a two-liter soda bottle and they don't need fire, he said.

"The precursor remains the same: pseudoephedrine," Lt. Farmer said. "But the other ingredients, the catalysts, are a little different and they're not customary to what we've trained the community and what we've trained our stores to be looking for."

Those ingredients include ammonia nitrate, lithium batteries and dry ice, he said.

Chattanooga police seized 11 meth labs in 2008 and eight so far this year, said Lt. Kirk Eidson, head of the department's narcotics unit. But police make meth lab seizures sporadically and may go months without busting one, he said.

And most meth makers don't manufacture it to sell it, he said. They need the highly addictive drug so badly they keep it for themselves, Lt. Eidson said.

"The majority of ours are

mainly for personal consumption and to share among friends," he said.

Manufacturers circumvent the laws by stealing pseudoephedrine, having friends purchase it for them or simply by tricking the system, Lt. Eidson said.

HELP IN GEORGIA

While Tennessee is updating its meth-fighting arsenal, Georgia needs help.

"The state of Georgia's behind and we have to catch up," said Larry Black, commander of the Lookout Mountain Judicial Task Force serving Walker, Catoosa and Dade counties. "We have to aggressively keep trying to get the word out to our Legislature that we need help."

The task force confiscated about 50 labs last year and has seized more than 100 this year to date, he said.

Unlike Tennessee's database to track pseudoephedrine sales, Georgia has no such system, Mr. Black said.

"We have to do a better job in catching up with our database and how we're tracking our pseudoephedrine purchases," he said.

Officials say the increase can be attributed to more people making meth by using faster and cheaper methods and an

inability for legislation and law enforcement to keep up.

Georgia state Rep. Tom Weldon, R-Ringgold, said he's examining various legislative proposals to make it harder to manufacture meth.

Too many people pile into vans, head to convenience stores or pharmacies, each buy one pseudoephedrine product and take them back to a meth maker to receive money or drugs for delivering them, he said.

Rep. Weldon said he and his colleagues must determine whether the best way to deter such practices is to allow only pharmacies to sell pseudoephedrine products — and not other locations such as convenience stores — or make such products prescription only, which still allows those who need the medicine to get it.

"I don't know many people or many families that haven't been affected by meth," he said. "It's a scourge."

GRAND OPENING



ANY T
ANY T

**HIBACHI GRILL
& FULL BAR**

1-800-D

\$34!