

1997 Herman Goldstein Award for
Excellence in Problem-Oriented Policing

A Nomination Submitted by
The Indiana State Police Department

METHCATHINONE "CAT" LABORATORIES



ABSTRACT

Scanning

The problem was clandestine laboratories producing methcathinone in south-central Indiana, information was received from local sheriffs and police departments, local troopers, individual citizens, welfare investigators, probation workers and local prosecutors of suspected methcathinone laboratories in the south-central area of Indiana.

Analysis

Runners, complaints and suspected activities were investigated and substantiated through select interviews. Lists were compiled of precursor destinations and compared with probation and warrant rosters to assist in developing probable cause.

Response

Action was taken to gain consent to search or search warrants were obtained.

Additionally, petitions were filed to revoke probation on violators and seek outplacement of children when warranted. Local news media provided coverage of actual arrests and later with news releases of seized cash and/or real property.

Assessment

The amount of chemicals and drugs we have diverted from the street is unprecedented in our state and many stolen articles have been recovered and numerous burglaries cleared. A major supplier of ephedrine, a necessary chemical for producing methcathinone, has been shut down, confidential informants advise that ephedrine can no longer be purchased in quantity and undercover officers are reporting that 'CAT is becoming more scarce on the street.

Scanning

South central and southwest Indiana is very rural and hilly consisting of farms and woodlands. The Hoosier National Forest, encompassing 195,000 acres, covers parts of nine southern Indiana counties. The problem of clandestine laboratories illegally manufacturing the narcotic drug, methcathinone, in and around Lawrence County was affecting the quality of life in a very widespread area in this section of Indiana.

The Indiana University campus at Bloomington, and other major cities nearby—Evansville and Indianapolis, Indiana, Louisville, Kentucky and Cincinnati, Ohio may have contributed to the manufacture of methcathinone, or CAT, in this very remote section of Indiana.

Methcathinone, a Schedule I narcotic with no known medicinal value, was being produced with a high degree of frequency in and around Lawrence County. The drug is generally manufactured in clandestine laboratories by the criminal element with little or no formal training in chemistry. This presented substantial health and safety risks to the public and themselves. The manufacturing process can be extremely volatile creating explosions and fires and causing further risks to public safety personnel responding to these incidents.

The illegal drug laboratories also produce by-products; hazardous chemicals which present an environmental waste or disposal problem potentially affecting large numbers of citizens.

Methcathinone, when abused, often causes strong addictions. Due to the addictive nature of CAT, "spin off" crimes occur as a direct result. Property crimes such as theft, burglary, check deception and robbery provides a source of funding for the addict's habit. CAT may also produce violent, paranoid behavior that results in personal injury crimes such as battery, domestic

violence, assault and child neglect. Our experience tells us that sex crimes such as prostitution also occurs as a means to fund their addictions.

Finally, methcathinone is commonly snorted, but increasingly we are finding that it is being injected through the use of hypodermic needles. The use of these needles presents another public health concern; that of AIDS and hepatitis.

An initial awareness of a possible problem came to us through a parent of an addict who provided us with information on one clandestine cooking operation. We were extremely surprised to learn about the high frequency of use and availability of CAT. The sheer numbers of illegal drug laboratories astounded us. The extent of the problem was further identified by surveying the public, local and county police agencies, local troopers, judicial officials and prosecutors of several counties. We found that the exchange of information from county to county is often lacking.

Further confirmation of this problem was obtained by acquiring lists of certain precursors purchased from area retailers. Ephedrine, the main precursor and building block of methamphetamine and methcathinone, is not sold to the public in Indiana. We determined through informants that it was being purchased and brought back to Indiana from retailers in Louisville, Kentucky. Upon securing records of one particular retailer of ephedrine, we learned that over ninety percent of all ephedrine he was selling was sold to residents located in and around Lawrence County, Indiana. These lists of ephedrine purchasers were yet another means to confirm that CAT was being manufactured by an alarmingly large number of persons in this area.

We continued our survey of local law enforcement agencies, judges, prosecutors, welfare officials, probation agents and members of the public at large. We were surprised to learn that this situation had been growing rapidly for the past three to four years.

This problem was selected as a project because of the life-threatening conditions and the large number of persons being affected. Our officers felt that they could produce a much longer term solution by solving the illegal manufacture of drugs than by attacking the other problems that arose as a direct result of the laboratories. We also found a large amount of community support for the need to address this issue.

The crime type was determined to be the illegal manufacture of a narcotic drug by individuals with little or no visible means of support or income. The suspects ranged in age from early twenties to early fifties. The extremely rural and often rugged terrain of south central and southwest Indiana provided viable cover for such illegal activities.

Analysis

Surveys both formal and informal of local police agencies of the various counties were conducted to assist in analyzing the scope of the problem. Interviews were conducted with select arrestees, while still in jail, and judicial officers provided information regarding sentencing. Contacts were made with probation officers, detectives working on property crimes as well as undercover officers working in the affected areas further assisted in an analysis of the scope of the problem. Finally, an overall analysis of all crime data in the geographic area further corroborated the significance of the problem.

CAT laboratories in this area of Indiana were first identified in 1993. With little proactive, aggressive enforcement action taking place, illegal drug laboratories continued to grow

to epidemic proportions until we determined that manufacturing was occurring somewhere on a daily basis in the target area.

The problem involved suspects, usually with little or no income, who ranged in age from their twenties to fifties. We discovered their primary motivations were to supplement their income, produce an income or to manufacture the narcotic because of their own addiction and inability to financially afford to purchase it from other dealers.

The problem also involves a number of victims ranging from the addicts themselves to property crime victims, violent and domestic crime victims, overdoses, property damage due to manufacturing accidents and children of producers harmed by ingesting or inhaling the product or chemicals. The risk to public safety personnel was also determined to be substantial.

The situation has a number of measurable harms. Those alluded to above as well as to the environment due to the improper handling and disposal of chemicals and by-products of the manufacturing process. The continuation of the problem would contribute to the local residents' losses associated with burglaries, thefts, shoplifting in businesses and robberies both strong arm and armed. Criminals were then using the proceeds of these illegal acts to fund their addiction.

Prior to the problem-solving project the issues were addressed through reactive enforcement efforts. The majority of illegal laboratory seizures in the past were as a result of a suspicious fire, traffic investigation in which evidence was discovered or in the course of some other routine police action. The results of these responses were totally inadequate to fully address the sizable growth of illegal laboratories in this part of the state in recent years as evidenced by their continued proliferation.

The analysis gave us further information that one cause of the escalating problem was the lack of aggressive, proactive enforcement action due to inadequate knowledge of the scope of the problem. The ready availability of ephedrine and other household chemicals compounded the problem. This, accompanied by the highly addictive nature of methcathinone further fueled the problem.

Our analysis revealed the continuing and escalating nature of the problem was compounding the potential of life-threatening conditions each time a fresh batch of narcotic was produced. By closely monitoring the lists of ephedrine purchasers it became evident that the extent of the problem was much more prevalent than first suspected. Finally, to more fully understand the extent of the problem and gather additional information, criminal informants were recruited to help identify the times, frequencies, locations and participants/other suspects and their associates.

Response

Open discussions were held with the various communities regarding the problem. Various forums were used. Town meetings, town board meetings, community groups and other gatherings were addressed. We learned that the community was aware of the situation but not the extent nor were they aware that other illegal activities were commonly associated with the problem. State Police officers educated the public at these various forums and requested their input and to act as our eyes and ears to further identify participants they suspected were involved.

Infiltration of manufacturers through undercover buys and informers who were providing legal precursors was undertaken. Having direct knowledge of individual purchases and

specifically who made them helped us pinpoint when and where manufacturing procedures might take place.

The alternative idea of setting up a store front to provide household chemicals, tubing, glassware and other related items needed by the suspects was explored. This would have allowed a much closer monitoring of suspects and their activities. Direct knowledge of equipment purchases and contact with the suspects would have assisted us later in identifying them through video or pictures taken at the time of their purchases. This procedure was abandoned due to the amount of personnel required, capital investment and the covert acquisition of physical facilities.

The response chosen to address the problem was to utilize all information gathered to get into the residences of suspected methcathinone users, dealers and manufacturers in the shortest amount of time. Keeping lengthy investigations to a minimum and generating the greatest number of enforcement opportunities in the shortest amount of time was our goal. This idea gained the communities' confidence and fostered additional sources of information which expedited enforcement action. The community's support was evidenced by increased momentum of their collective participation as evidenced by anonymous letters, increased telephone calls to police agencies, child welfare officials saying they never knew to whom they could give the information about such illegal activities they were getting from their children clients and finally the probation authorities seeing a way to solve their problems by cooperating with the police in this matter. In summary, it could be said that the problem-solving approach created a synergistic climate among a variety of agencies that previously did not exist.

After several arrests were made primarily through the use of ephedrine purchase lists, we approached the large ephedrine supplier in Louisville and asked for his assistance. Even though

he owned a "head" shop, which also supplied the greater Louisville area with hydroponics and other marijuana growing materials, we were able to "convince" him to stop selling ephedrine tablets.

Additionally, officers initiated other proactive means to stop the cycle of crime. For example, if those arrested had children, a case was drawn and investigation conducted with child welfare agency personnel in an effort to get the children placed in a better environment. If the arrested had any financial assets, forfeiture actions were taken on his real property, vehicles, personal property and currency in an effort to curtail his ongoing criminal enterprise.

Our response was developed from information analysis which indicated that the previous reactive responses were ineffective. Continued occurrence of illegal laboratories was resulting in increased fires, higher numbers of related crimes (especially property crimes) and deaths from overdoses were occurring. We concluded that our response must be proactive and an effort to cut off the supply of the main precursor, ephedrine, was initiated. We also concluded that in order to achieve the desired response and gain the public's confidence we needed swift and aggressive enforcement action.

This success, in turn, would allow us the leverage needed to persuade the ephedrine supplier in our area to be a part of our solution or to continue to be a problem. After several checks of his records by Drug Enforcement Administration agents and a single visit to his establishment by uniformed Indiana State Police officers, the business owner decided to be a part of the solution.

Shutting down this one supplier of ephedrine has not stopped the manufacturers. It has however, made it more difficult for them to find the precursor thus reducing the frequency of

clandestine laboratories. We were convinced that by decreasing the numbers of laboratories we could reduce the amount of narcotics. We were also expecting to decrease the numbers of addicted individuals through identification and guide them to professional sources of help for their addiction. Property and other ancillary crimes were expected to diminish.

In solving the problem, we used a number of resources, each of which provided us with certain necessary and timely information. This, in turn, allowed us to compile a very accurate picture of the scope and nature of the problem. When corroborated, this information provided us with an immediate means to enter a suspect's residence through the use of search warrants. This information came from local troopers, sheriffs deputies, other police officers, welfare officers, judicial officers, prosecutor's investigators, criminal informants, undercover officers, public letters and calls and private business owners. Drug Enforcement Agency agents were also used to help persuade the suppliers to do the right thing.

The swiftest route into a suspect's home was the method chosen. Often we cross referenced our ephedrine list with warrant lists and utilized an active warrant to access targeted suspect's living environments which, in every case, resulted in the confiscation of a clandestine laboratory.

If warrants were not available, we cross referenced our ephedrine list to the probation list. In Lawrence County, through a signed contract with the probationer, the individual waives his right to search and seizure as a condition of his/her probation (as long as the search is made by the probation officer or a law enforcement officer). If a suspect appeared on both lists they received a visit. Again, in every case an arrest was made.

The above two methods were preferred to access residences because they were determined to be less time consuming and most effective. As a result, twenty illegal laboratories were seized; fourteen from search warrants and six from other investigations. Eighty-three total criminal arrests were made from these investigations and seizures.

When complaints were received and an investigation began because the suspect was not on probation or had no active warrants, we would often seize discarded trash. Trash collections often provided us with the needed information to obtain search warrants. Our rate of success on these search warrants was overwhelming. Nearly every search warrant executed resulted in laboratory seizures.

Next, we began receiving lists from local business owners who were legally providing our suspects with chemicals such as toluene, xylene, muratic acid, battery acid and accessory items such as tubing. This information helped us associate criminals and hastened access to their residences.

Subsequent to implementing our response plan, we correlated all of the lists we had compiled for intelligence purposes and met with the resources alluded to above and determined what service each could provide and how we could best utilize them.

We also met regularly with the local prosecutors to make them aware of our overall goals and to provide us with legal advice. As this type of aggressive investigation had never been tested with manufacturing or conspiracy to manufacture cases in this quantity, we felt the support of the local prosecutor was essential. Once his assurance of strong prosecution was in place, we formed an informal task force with his help. The task force consisted of our problem-oriented

police officers, two undercover Indiana State Police troopers and one local police officer whose time was dedicated to this effort.

Prior to forming our task force and implementing our plan, we decided to test it. Two problem oriented troopers gathered all resource and information lists then visited three suspects in a one week time period. All three were arrested on charges of manufacturing methcathinone and clandestine laboratories were located and destroyed in each case. It was quickly becoming apparent that we needed to form the task force and vigorously attack the problem. No difficulties were encountered due in part to the flexibility of the undercover troopers and the local officer's involvement. Any assistance we requested was quickly granted.

The freedom to work any shift, any day was also essential and given the latitude to work in or out of uniform as the detail dictated, also contributed to our success.

Several police agencies and other governmental agencies that included nine separate agents were involved in our response. However, the most actively involved were two problem oriented Indiana State Police officers, two undercover State Police troopers, one local police officer and the Indiana State Police Clandestine Laboratory Entry Team.

Assessment

We are currently in the early stages of assessment in this project and foresee problems unique to a state police agency with a large geographic area of responsibility. These problems can be dealt with over time and will likely lengthen our response to other counties as we continue our assessment of this project.

In 1995 we located and destroyed six illegal laboratories statewide. Last year resulted in thirteen clandestine operations shutdown and removed from the state. This year to date, we have

identified *the* major methcathinone producer in the south central and southwest region along with most of his associates. Also, in 1997 the Indiana State Police have confiscated and neutralized over twenty clandestine laboratories throughout the state, sixteen in the south central and southwest area of Indiana alone (See Attached Map). One of the laboratories was our primary target. The amount of chemicals and drugs we have diverted from the street is unprecedented in our state relative to clandestine methcathinone laboratory operations.

Numerous stolen items have been recovered as part of our investigation and several stolen firearms recovered. Approximately ten burglaries and thefts have been cleared as a result of these efforts.

Several lifetime "career" criminals are awaiting trial in local jails one of which is facing his third strike—habitual offender status which will remove him from our community for a number of years. Our investigation determined that he alone was responsible for several burglaries, robberies and thefts each month.

Finally, the major supplier of the precursor ephedrine in this area has been shut down making it more difficult for potential manufacturers to produce methcathinone. The criminal's comfort zone in this community has been reduced and should continue to shrink as we monitor the situation in this area.

While this problem is not solved in our state or even in this community, for the first time we have a strong grasp of not only the problem but a successful means of combating it. Our department, other agencies and departments and the community all have confidence in our ability to eliminate this problem in time. The first step in solving statewide problems such as this is to

find a workable and successful response plan. We have been able to do that. Our next step is to broaden this plan to others through training which we have just begun to do.

Again, we are in the initial stages of overall evaluation but we are receiving much positive feedback from the community, our department and other governmental agencies in the affected area.

Undercover officers are confirming that CAT , at least for now, is becoming more scarce on the street. We have also learned from some parents of addicted children that they are receiving professional help for their addictions for the first time. Confidential informants tell us that ephedrine can no longer be purchased in Louisville, Kentucky in the large maximum quantities it could previous to our efforts.

Indiana State Police officers continue evaluating the effects of our efforts through monthly community meetings, continual monitoring of property crimes and interviewing the rank and file members of the various local departments and review of adjudicated drug cases. Street level information is being monitored by continuous contact with criminal informants.

There were no major problems encountered in implementing our response plan. The uniformed problem-oriented police officers gathered information from a number of sources not available to our undercover officers due to their covert operation. Likewise, the undercover officers could provide us with resources we were unable to attain such as the ability to initiate controlled buys or through a buy/bust operation. Much covert intelligence was supplied by these officers. The marriage of the problem-oriented police units and the undercover units was instrumental in our success as was the flexibility to work variable schedules.

As stated earlier, our goals were met in that we did gain public confidence through our successful efforts. As we have only recently (the past three years) begun problem-oriented policing, some in our agency were skeptical of our ability to be effective. Gaining our peer's confidence was not a goal but came as an added bonus and will make the current transition to department-wide problem oriented policing smoother.

We also met our second goal to eliminate certain precursors and/or reduce the frequency of their acquisition. With a problem as serious as these illegal and extremely dangerous methcathinone laboratories in a very large and remote geographic area, we felt it was unreasonable to eliminate the problem without first being successful in reducing its frequency. Now that we have reduced the frequency, we feel it is reasonable to eliminate the problem long term.

We also feel that the spin off crimes, which are harder to measure, are also on the decline and will only continue their downward turn with continued enforcement efforts. We are also aware that the some property crimes may initially increase as the source of income for the drug dealers begins to dry up. This area will be monitored very closely. If that occurs it will be just another problem to address with initiative and proactive policing.

The only thing we could have done to make our response more effective would have been to devote more manpower to our plan of action. Due to the problems unique to a State Police agency and the large geographic area involved, additional officers could have been used. However, now that a successful model has been completed we hope and expect to see additional resources devoted to those communities. The district commander for the ISP district servicing

the Lawrence County area has already assigned an officer and dedicated him to work full-time on this problem. POP units have trained him to continue following the model they began.

Even though there is no evidence of this problem spreading beyond south central Indiana, displacement was a concern. No aggressive enforcement action had taken place to date which may explain why methcathinone production appears to be a regional problem.

We decided to also eliminate or control known sources of precursors and are continuing to do this. We feel precursors are one choke point where we can effect a larger area. There are only so many sources of ephedrine that will sell to the public in quantities great enough to manufacture methcathinone.

Members of our Clandestine Laboratory Entry Team are involved in the process of working toward changes in the Indiana statutes relating to ephedrine and pseudoephedrine. We believe our stepped up enforcement effort and this project will help to provide legislators with documentation needed to enact stronger laws pertaining to such precursors.

With continued response, ever-changing proactive investigative tactics and continued community involvement, we foresee the day when CAT will be infrequently produced. While methcathinone has taken a foothold in several south central and southwest Indiana counties, there is very little evidence of it spreading. It has been present for four years and for an unknown reason has remained a regional problem.

With this in mind we are committed to resolving this problem before it spreads. We are confident we can and will make the criminal so uncomfortable and make CAT so difficult to produce that he will embark on other, more legal, avenues of income generation.

