The festering problem of methamphetamine in Illinois

Multijurisdictional drug units struggle to stem the rising tide of meth labs popping up in rural areas of the state

By Daniel Dighton

Methamphetamine is not the most commonly abused drug in Illinois, nor is it responsible for the most arrests. But it has quickly become the most dangerous and vexing problem for law enforcement in many rural areas, particularly in central and southern parts of the state.

While marijuana and cocaine are more popular and account for far more arrests, the manner in which methamphetamine is manufactured and distributed is so unique, and its addictive properties so powerful, that it has forced police in rural areas to alter their drug enforcement strategies as they struggle to keep up with the drug's rapid spread.

“It’s the most dangerous drug and the most quickly spreading drug I’ve ever seen. I’ve never seen anything like this,” said Illinois State Police Lt. Thomas Oliverio, who commands two drug task forces in southern Illinois.

Data from the 21 multijurisdictional drug units operating in Illinois in 2003 show that the number of clandestine meth labs seized in the state increased

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to 971 that year from just 24 in 1997. Rural counties accounted for 83 percent of the lab seizures. While most of the meth labs have been in southern and central Illinois, data gathered by the Authority indicates the problem is spreading north and into more urban areas.

In 2003, 10 metropolitan enforcement groups (MEGs), and 11 drug task forces (one task force has since disbanded) made up the multijurisdictional drug enforcement units in Illinois. They were active in 63 of the state's 102 counties. In many regions they are in the forefront in the battle against meth, and they provide the only detailed arrest data available on the drug. For most law enforcement agencies in the state, meth arrests are lumped in with several other drugs that are reported to the state as arrests under the Controlled Substances Act.

Agents with the Southeastern Illinois Drug Task Force, which is based in Effingham and operates in Clark, Clay, Crawford, and Cumberland counties, encountered their first clandestine meth laboratories around 1996-1997, Oliverio said. By 1999 meth had emerged as a serious and time-consuming law enforcement issue. Last year the task force's five agents and their supervisor found 35 meth labs and made 70 meth-related arrests.

Methamphetamine is a powerful stimulant that provides an intense high and feeling of euphoria. The effects can last for several hours, and some users will binge on the drug for days at a time. It has an extremely high addictive potential.

It just takes over,” Oliverio said. “I’ve never seen a drug take hold of a person like methamphetamine does. They can’t control the meth, it controls them.”

In many areas of the country where meth has taken hold, which are mostly rural areas in the West and Midwest, police have reported notable increases in violent crime, domestic violence, and child abuse, according to the DEA.

According to Master Sgt. Fred Bray, supervisor of the Southeastern Illinois Drug Task Force under Oliverio, meth...
New Authority report analyzes multijurisdictional drug enforcement unit activities, with a special section on meth

The 21 multijurisdictional drug enforcement units in Illinois last year consisted of 11 drug task forces and 10 metropolitan enforcement groups (MEGs). MEGs and task forces operate basically the same but have some minor organizational differences (see page 7).

Authority Senior Research Analyst Robert Bauer, with assistance from other staff researchers, recently prepared a report analyzing data from MEG and task force activities in Illinois. In 2002, the latest year that data was available for the report, 196 local police agencies participated in a MEG or task force. The units operated in 63 of Illinois 102 counties, serving a combined population of more than 6 million. The analysis of the MEGs and task forces also includes detailed reports on each individual unit.

The main summary report includes a “Special Focus” section on the impact of methamphetamine in the areas covered by the drug enforcement units. The report provides detailed information on meth-related arrests, drug submissions to state labs, meth lab seizures, and treatment.

The report, “Assessing Illinois’ Metropolitan Enforcement Groups and Task Forces,” and separate profiles of each unit are available on the Authority’s website at www.icia.state.il.us, or by calling the Authority’s Criminal Justice Information Clearinghouse, 312-793-8550.

users will usually start out snorting the drug. After building up a tolerance they will switch to smoking to get the same high, and eventually they begin injecting the drug. “Usually, if they’ve been doing it for any time, they turn to needles,” he said.

Meth users tend to be volatile and extremely paranoid, Oliverio said. He has noticed that they seem to have a fascination with weapons and homemade bombs, and their homes are often heavily fortified. The task force confiscated 71 weapons last year, most of them connected to meth arrests.

Increasingly, his task force agents are finding homes with meth labs that have been outfitted with small surveillance cameras outside, which are hooked up to TV monitors inside so the meth user can watch anyone approaching the house.

It’s the type of behavior that makes drug enforcement agents extremely uneasy about what they may be walking into when they are approaching a suspected meth lab. “You always worry about officer safety, but you worry about them a lot more when they are going to a meth lab,” Oliverio said.

Environmental hazard

And it’s not just the paranoid meth users that are a problem; the entire process of making meth, known as “cooking,” is extremely dangerous. Numerous volatile chemicals are used and stored in assorted household containers that weren’t intended for that purpose. Meth lab explosions and fires are common. The chemical ingredients are toxic, the fumes from the production are toxic, and the waste that is leftover and usually carelessly dumped is toxic.

The U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy, in a November 2003 fact sheet, pointed out that producing one pound of meth leaves behind five to seven pounds of toxic waste, which is often dumped down household drains, in yards, or in rural areas.

To investigate and gather evidence at meth lab sites, officers have to take a course and become meth lab-certified. At meth lab sites they have to wear special protective clothing and a breathing apparatus or facemask. Most of the task force officers are lab-certified, but most officers in small police departments are not. If police outside a task force area come across a lab, and they don’t have a lab-certified officer, they have to call the federal Drug Enforcement Administration to handle the case.

When any investigation of a meth lab site is complete, private companies that specialize in hazardous waste removal

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Research

Evaluation of the Chicago Public School’s Peer Jury Program

An evaluation will begin this spring focusing on the Chicago Public School’s Peer Jury Program and its operation and development during the 2004/2005 school year. The study will focus on three schools that implement the program, but will also involve the collection of some general descriptive data pertaining to the program as a whole. The evaluation will assist program practitioners and technical support staff in improving the program, and assist Chicago Public School’s administrative staff in making future decisions regarding the program. In addition, the study will contribute to research examining restorative justice and programming for minors.

Website statistics

As the statewide clearinghouse for statistics and other information about the criminal justice system, the Authority’s Research and Analysis Unit responded to more than 1,200 requests for information in 2003. Fifty-two percent of these requests were originated electronically via e-mail or through the Authority website (www.icjia.state.il.us). There were more than 175,000 visitors to the website in 2003 and 285,893 downloads of publications and information. These downloads were in addition to the 70,242 publications sent out by Authority staff to people who made requests.

The Criminal Justice Dispatch automatically notifies registered users via e-mail twice monthly of the website’s newest information. The e-mail contains direct links to new content. At the end of 2003, more than 1,400 users were registered with CJ Dispatch—double the number of users that were registered when the service was made available in fall 2001.

Needs assessment study

The Authority will send out a request for proposals (RFP) to conduct a criminal justice needs assessment in Illinois. The primary purpose of this study is to supply information that will demonstrate the needs of criminal justice organizations, and identify areas that need improvement. The information will also be used to guide decision-making regarding where to best allocate resources. A secondary purpose is to make information available to more than 175,000 visitors to the Authority website (www.icjia.state.il.us). Fifty-two percent of these requests were originated electronically via e-mail or through the Authority website (www.icjia.state.il.us). There were more than 175,000 visitors to the website in 2003 and 285,893 downloads of publications and information. These downloads were in addition to the 70,242 publications sent out by Authority staff to people who made requests.

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Common ingredients

Anhydrous ammonia, a common fertilizer, is an important ingredient for manufacturing meth. It is plentiful in large storage tanks on farms and at distribution plants in rural areas. Because the tanks are often in remote areas, it is relatively easy to break into the tanks and steal a small amount of ammonia.

Guess said he may get two to three calls a week from ammonia plant operators reporting thefts. But the plants are usually so spread out and in such remote areas that it is almost impossible to catch the thieves. Task force agents have even set up surveillance at the plants, but word quickly gets around in the small towns, and the meth users go someplace else, Guess said.

The primary ingredient for making methamphetamine is pseudoephedrine, which is commonly found in over-the-counter cold medicines. Recently, major drug store chains have taken measures to limit the amount of cold medicines a person can buy at one time, but that just presents more of an inconvenience for meth users than a real deterrent. “Instead of one stop they’ll make six stops,” Oliverio said.

The task force agents also get occasional tips from drug store employees suspicious of people buying large quantities of cold medicines.

Meth cooks have become more sophisticated in their operations, and they have also become more mobile. Instead of setting up a lab in a house, they may put the ingredients in a van or trunk of a car and go out into the country to cook the meth.

“Our meth cooks are much more efficient. They want to keep it small, concealable and disposable,” Bray said.

Originated in west

When methamphetamine first appeared on the U.S. drug scene, it was primarily associated with motorcycle gangs out west. In the 1990s, Mexican drug organizations began mass-producing high-quality meth in “superlabs” in Mexico and Southern California. Lately, much of the production has shifted to Northern California as a result of law enforcement efforts in the south, according to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

More recently, and driven largely by how easy and relatively inexpensive it is to make meth, it has become popular with small, independent producers. Working from makeshift labs set up in their homes or other locations, these manufacturers, who are mostly Caucasions, make small batches of meth, according to the DEA. Unlike the labs that Oliverio and Guess have been encountering in Illinois, many of these independent labs in other parts of the country are set up to profit from the proceeds of their drug sales.

Research continued

The evaluation of Sheridan will be a collaborative effort between the Authority and the Illinois Department of Corrections, and will be guided by an Evaluation Advisory Committee. The process and impact evaluation will involve extensive quantitative data collection and qualitative information from focus groups and interviews with staff and participants. The evaluation will seek to measure changes in participant attitudes, beliefs and psychological functioning, in addition to participants’ preparedness for release. The study also will examine the extent and nature of institutional violations and measures of recidivism after release. Employment and access to services also will be studied.
**Grants**

**Local Law Enforcement Block Grants**
The Authority received just more than $1 million to administer the Local Law Enforcement Block Grant (LLEBG) program in federal fiscal year 2003. LLEBG funding may be used for purposes of reducing crime and improving public safety. Proposals from local agencies were due in February and awards will be announced this spring.

**National Criminal History Information Improvement Program**
About $1.7 million was received to administer the National Criminal History Information Improvement Program (NCHIP) in FFY03. NCHIP was established in 1995 to promote the accuracy, completeness, and timeliness of criminal history records.

**Project Safe Neighborhoods**
The Authority received nearly $1.7 million in federal funding to administer the Project Safe Neighborhoods program in the northern and central Illinois districts. Project Safe Neighborhoods was established to reduce gun crime by networking existing local programs that target gun crime and providing those programs with additional tools necessary to be successful.

**National Forensic Sciences Improvement Act**
About $150,000 was received to administer the National Forensic Sciences Improvement Act (NFSIA) in Illinois in federal fiscal year 2003. NFSIA program provides funding to crime laboratories and medical examiner’s offices to improve the quality and timeliness of forensic science or medical examiner services. Awards are based on population and crime statistics and may be used for expenses related to facilities, personnel, computerization, equipment, supplies, accreditation, and training.

Over the past couple of years meth appears to have made inroads into Chicago. Of the meth seized and submitted to Illinois State Police labs for analysis in 2002, 26 percent of the samples were from Chicago. In 2003, 19 percent of the samples submitted for testing were from Chicago.

Chicago is considered by the DEA to be a transit hub for meth from labs in Mexico and California going to other points. It also is a major transit point for illegal shipments of pseudoephedrine from Canadian chemical companies. Chicago was one of 10 cities where last year U.S. and Canadian agents arrested 65 individuals targeted in a major investigation of the illegal importation of pseudoephedrine destined for meth labs in the west. Information from a DEA news release on the 18-month investigation provides some insight into the scale of the organized meth drug trade. “Approximately 14,000 pounds (108 million tablets) of pseudoephedrine…was seized during this investigation,” the DEA said. “This pseudoephedrine, believed to be destined for meth labs in the western United States, would yield approximately 9,000 pounds of methamphetamine with a street value of between $36 and $144 million.”

**Efforts to combat meth**
In addition to the more than $6 million each year the Authority designates in federal funds for the multijurisdictional drug enforcement units, which use a large portion of their funding to combat meth, several state initiatives have been launched to attack the meth problem.

Project X is Gov. Rod Blagojevich’s $2.5 million initiative against methamphetamine and the drug Ecstasy. Project X is a three-pronged approach to stamping out the two drugs, putting resources into law enforcement, prevention, and treatment. The governor has also signed into law legislation cracking down on people making meth, and those who help them make or help obtain the ingredients for making meth.

Attorney General Lisa Madigan has taken an active role in a meth awareness campaign focusing on anhydrous ammonia theft and how to safeguard ammonia tanks. The Attorney General’s Office recently added a “MethNet” feature on its website that provides information on meth in Illinois and efforts to combat the problem (www.ag.state.il.us).

According to the drug agents on the front lines fighting meth, it’s going to take education and prevention to stem the tide of the drug, because law enforcement efforts alone won’t be enough. As Oliverio described it, “it’s like the proverbial finger in the dike.” Despite their hard work and long hours, there is only so much the task force agents can do with their limited manpower and resources.

“I don’t see any end to it any time soon,” said Oliverio. “My personal feeling is you have to educate people not to want to do it.”

Guess agreed that education is the key to stopping meth. And since it is one of the most difficult drugs to get off once you become addicted, longer and more intense treatment programs will also be needed.

Still, Guess said, the task force agents are helping to keep meth from becoming an even bigger problem in their areas, and they are seeing results from their education efforts. “We’re definitely having an impact on the community,” he said. “Are we stopping the meth epidemic? No, not really.”

Photo provided by Southeastern Illinois Drug Task Force
The Authority, using federal money allocated under the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, helps fund 20 multijurisdictional drug enforcement units in Illinois. (There had been 21 units before Task Force X in Macon and Champaign counties disbanded last year.) These units operate in 61 of the state’s 102 counties. The units are organized as either metropolitan enforcement groups (MEGs) or drug task forces. In 2003, nearly 200 police agencies were participating in a MEG or task force and nearly 300 local, state and federal officers were assigned to the various units.

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Created by state statute specifically to enforce drug laws, certain weapons violations and street gang-related offenses, MEGs must include at least two local law enforcement agencies. At least half of their funding must come from the participating local agencies. In addition to federal grants, the units also receive general revenue funds from the state. MEGs must make reports to the Illinois State Police, and the units typically include ISP officers. MEGs are governed by policy boards made up of officials from the participating agencies.

The 10 MEGs in Illinois are “stand-alone” operations. They cooperate with other agencies, but work independently. Administrative details are handled by the individual MEGs, specifically, by the officers designated as directors and assistant directors of the units. The units are often housed in their own facilities, usually rented or leased office space. The MEG directors are selected from any of the participating agencies by the unit’s policy board.

MEGs generally target low- to mid-level drug dealers. The agents frequently work with local police departments to address pressing drug enforcement needs. The units are also authorized to investigate street gang activity.

Drug task forces are established through interagency agreements between local agencies and the Illinois State Police (ISP). Task forces do not receive state general revenue funds. These units do not have to limit their operations to the enforcement of drug laws, but must perform those functions to qualify for the federal anti-drug money administered by the Authority. Like MEGs, the drug task forces typically target low- to mid-level drug dealers.

The 10 drug task forces are housed in ISP facilities, commanded by ISP officers, and governed by a policy board. Vehicles and other equipment for the task forces are provided by ISP and through grant funds. Participating local agencies contribute officers or money, depending on their particular agreement with the task force.