

## Meth Crisis Is Closer To You Than You Think

By D'Val Westphal  
*Of the Journal*

So if you don't leave anything in your mailbox overnight, religiously shred everything with your name on it and are positive your neighbors aren't brewing up a pot of Sudafed, iodine and red phosphorous, do you really need to be concerned about the rising wave of methamphetamine use?

Yes, because you've only started paying for its fallout.

Local government, law enforcement and health-care officials agree meth has hit the Metro area with a vengeance. Mayor Martin Chávez says, "It's our No. 1 crime problem." Bernalillo County Commission Chairman Alan Armijo says it's one of the main reasons the jail is overcrowded. Albuquerque Police Department Chief Ray Schultz says almost all of the area's property crime is fueled by drugs, 50 percent to 60 percent by meth addiction. And Blaine Benson, director of the New Mexico Poison Center at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, says it simply "kills people. Not just a couple, not just criminals — it kills everybody."

Everybody includes the girl next door.

Last month an 18-year-old Belen woman was found dead in a Rio Rancho arroyo. Described by her father, Richard Turberville, as a "fun-loving, happy-go-lucky kid," Amber Turberville had blogged about struggling with drug use and warned, "Meth is something you don't ever want to touch, don't ever even try it once, it's not worth it."

Her dad says there's no evidence of an overdose and wants to know who killed her. Police aren't releasing any additional information. But it's a scenario that's all too familiar.

Crystal Darkness, a national campaign to raise awareness of the drug and its destruction, has scores of stories on its Web site ([crystaldarkness.com](http://crystaldarkness.com)) from addicts and their families. All have a common theme of losing everything.

"Everything" starts with looks and teeth, moves quickly on to scholarships and jobs, and ends soon with loved ones and lives.

At the county's Web site ([bernco.gov](http://bernco.gov)), the 35-minute "Life or Meth" video shows that what started out as a biker drug is now found across Bernalillo County, where 12-year-olds are using, mothers leave their kids to score dope, and the jail offers a welcome respite from the constant need to get high.

But officials warn that if there's nothing more than jail and bail, the revolving door at the Metropolitan Detention Center is only going to spin faster.

Armijo says the big question is "how do you address an issue that's becoming a big drug problem besides putting them in jail, where they come out, then go back? (We need to get them) off the drug, and off the crime that supports their habit."

APD says that crime added up to \$73 million in stolen property last year. Schultz says even if you weren't a direct victim, you're still paying — for the security guards, the theft-prevention tags, to cover the cost of the stolen razor blades and deodorant and nicotine patches the meth heads are selling to pay for their habit.

His officers try to arrest addicts before they graduate to violent crimes, where a burglary or robbery goes bad and they attack somebody, "shoot somebody, kill somebody." That kind of escalation happened 267 times in January alone.

To that end, Chávez says the city has tried to train everyone who goes door to door — meter readers, cable installers, postal carriers — to recognize the signs of a meth lab and call police. APD Capt. Joe Hudson says officers shut down 11 labs in the Metro area last year; this year they've already busted 16. A new computer server will go through all those sales sheets at local pharmacies and target "smurfers," people who go store to store buying the maximum allowed of cold and allergy meds for meth ingredients.

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In addition, Schultz says every Friday he gets a list of cases that include the red flag “METHER” so officials know not to let a defendant skate through the system as a simple thief when he or she could be part of an organized meth crime ring.

While there are fewer labs within the city limits, the crackdown has simply pushed many over the city and county lines. Hudson says an increased Mexican Army presence on the border has tamped down that supply, though “very pure, 97- to 98-percent” pure Mexican meth continues to arrive via “planes, trains and automobiles.”

To move beyond treating the major symptom of meth addiction — crime — to attacking the disease, the city and county have each kicked in \$30,000 to the Mid-Region Council of Governments to fund a 17-member Regional Methamphetamine Task Force. Steve Gallegos, regional criminal justice specialist for MRCOG, says the goal is to “take the best of all programs and put together our own.

“We have to look at the logic of what this drug does and what we can do as a community to change the course.”

Much of that work is being done at the Mind Research Network, a nonprofit started by Sen. Pete Domenici on the UNM campus. Medical director Dr. John Phillips says it has “some of the best addiction researchers working (at) a state-of-the-art neuroimaging research facility.” Those researchers are trying to identify genes that make people more likely to become addicts (to better target prevention), identify genes that make relapse more likely (though MRN scientific director Dr. Vince Clark says the relapse rate is 50 percent in six months, 90 percent overall) and identify genes that make certain treatments more likely to work.

The task force is expected to complete its report on best practices in November, Gallegos says. Until then, the county has a Meth Crisis Response Team, 266-6372, and provides a 30-day treatment program through MATS, the Metropolitan Assessment Treatment Services.

Chávez says the task force shows officials are “very aggressive and active on this issue. We are not a community in denial.”

We can’t be. Because even if you safeguard your mail and have a shredder and watch your neighbors, there’s too much truth in the warning from Mariya Farooqi, a fellow at the Poison Center:

“Your child could be sitting next to a child whose parents do meth.”

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