

Reports highlight rising methamphetamine health crisis across US Midwest

Jacob Crosse
24 October 2019

Data compiled by the Wisconsin State Crime Lab highlights the staggering rise in the use of methamphetamine across the state. Over a 10 year period the agency recorded over a 450 percent increase in meth related cases, from 314 in 2008 to 1,452 in 2018. This follows an earlier report that revealed that 3,800 people died in Wisconsin from 2014-2018 due to meth related overdoses.

This is a region-wide issue, with the Missouri State Highway Patrol reporting a similar spike in drug seizures over the same period. Iowa and Illinois have also seen a surge in meth related cases. Morbidly dubbed the “meth capital of the Midwest,” Michigan saw 220 meth seizures by police in 2018. The increase in drug seizures has led to more meth related arrests and fueled higher rates of incarceration.

To the west of Wisconsin, the Drug Enforcement Agencies’ Omaha Division, which oversees Nebraska, North and South Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota has seen a similar jump in meth cases or seizures. According to the DEA, more meth-related drug seizures have occurred in the region in the first half of 2019 than in all of 2018.

A “seizure incident” includes scenarios in which state or federal authorities discover drug paraphernalia or equipment used to make illicit substances, including chemical tubing, glassware, beakers, or dumpsites.

The introduction of methamphetamine into the general population began in World War II with the War Department issuing amphetamine and methamphetamine to US bomber pilots on long flight missions to keep them alert before they dropped their deadly payload. Meanwhile, US infantrymen were issued the drugs, less for any actual combat effectiveness, but instead to boost “morale” while also increasing “confidence and aggression.”

Following the war, and throughout the 1950s, doctors heavily prescribed amphetamines under the name Benzedrine. Colloquially known at the time as “bennies” or “pep pills,” Benzedrine was used to primarily treat sinus-related issues. In 1960 the FDA approved a new “diet pill” known as Obetrol, manufactured by American

pharmaceutical company Obetrol Pharmaceuticals, a mix of amphetamine salts, including methamphetamine, that made up the chemical compound of the drug.

While marketed as treatment for obesity, the drug was used most notably by artist Andy Warhol, but also extensively by long-haul truck drivers, forced to stay awake an unhealthy amount of hours in order to meet their delivery schedules. After widespread abuse throughout the 1960s the drug was eventually pulled from the market in 1973.

After a reworking of the formula and the elimination of methamphetamine the drug was rebranded as Adderal and introduced onto the market by pharmaceutical giant Richwood-Shire, following their 1995 acquisition of the Rexar Pharmacal Corporation, which had slowly absorbed Obetrol Pharmaceuticals throughout the 1980s and 90s. It was given FDA approval in 1996 to treat “hyperactivity.”

While recent media attention has shone a much needed spotlight on the opioid crisis, meth use among Americans has become more prevalent in recent years as opioids have become harder to obtain and more expensive. As more people turn to meth, possibly as they are experiencing heroin or opioid withdrawals or just to stay awake while working multiple jobs to survive, a corresponding increase in the amount of meth related deaths has also occurred.

Nearly 60 percent of meth users relapse within the first year while going through rehabilitation treatment. This relapse is a particularly deadly period for older meth users, as the strong chemical effects of the drug can have a deadly effect on an aging user’s heart and brain. Unlike opioids, there is no medical treatment for meth addiction.

According to national government statistics compiled by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, among all ages, 10,333 people died in 2017 due to methamphetamine overdose. This is out of 70,237 total drug overdose deaths in 2017, accounting for nearly 14 percent of all overdose deaths that occurred in the United States.

While a rise in cases and seizures doesn’t necessarily correspond to a rise in usage, statistics compiled from various state and federal agencies confirm that meth use has

not subsided from its alleged highpoint in the mid-2000's, which saw the passage of the 2005 Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act.

The 2005 bill, signed by George W. Bush and passed with bipartisan support, sought to criminalize over-the-counter medications such as Sudafed that were used in the manufacture of methamphetamine as well as for treating common allergies. The legislation, while funneling money to police departments and federal drug and immigration agencies, did little to actually stop meth production and use.

While the bill did force out and shut down many smaller local labs, while also incarcerating thousands of people across the country for a medical problem, large scale production continued in the US southwest and across the border in Mexico. Powerful drug cartels took over production, and using industrial methods, began producing more potent and pure methamphetamine that was trafficked into large cities and then distributed throughout rural communities.

This shift in production is expressed in the arrest reports of the various state agencies. There were only eight "seizures" of 11 pounds of meth or more throughout all of 2005. The largest of these raids occurred in Omaha, Nebraska which netted 29 pounds of the drug. This amount is dwarfed by raids completed in the beginning of 2019 in Minnesota and Iowa, which have seized 250 and 119 pounds of the drug respectively.

This hasn't stopped politicians and law enforcement officials from loudly proclaiming the need for more money to be poured into state police forces and federal drug and immigration agencies, while also blaming the legalization of recreational marijuana in a number of states for an increase in alternative drug production and use.

While police departments and federal agencies such as the DEA and ICE have been flooded with billions of dollars in funding for drones, urban assault vehicles and military weaponry, funding for treating substance abuse as a public health issue has been relatively sparse and surrounded by layers of bureaucratic red tape, making it nearly impossible for those seeking treatment to get the help and resources they need.

The federal government did recently make \$6 billion available for opioid treatment throughout the United States, however, this money is limited to opioid related treatment only. This means that many users who might have previously used opioids but recently switched to the more available and cheaper meth, are no longer eligible for opioid specific treatment options and funding.

In an article published by *Urban Milwaukee*, Jess Przybylski, a Wisconsin mother of two, related that it was easier for her to get treatment for her addiction *after* she was

arrested for meth related charges as opposed to before. In a testament to the backwardness and illogical character of capitalism, Przybylski was forced to sit in a jail cell for four months, waiting for a bed to open up at a local treatment facility before she could begin her recovery process.

While Przybylski says she is thankful that after getting out of jail she had access to the longer care treatment program she needed, she recognizes that many don't, and without will likely fall back into old patterns. "If you get out and you don't have anywhere to go, where are you going to go? Back to what you're comfortable with and back to where you were using," she noted.

In states such as Wisconsin, where \$63 million was made available to combat opioid addiction, very little of it will actually get spent on those who need it the most. According to the latest survey by the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, of the 397,000 people in the state with addictions related to substance abuse, less than 10 percent actually received any medical treatment.

This red tape has resulted in treatment homes being forced to turn away those looking for help lest they lose their funding. Nearly 40 percent of all substance abuse treatment funds in the state come from the federal government, and without those funds a majority of them would cease to operate.

After decades of the drug war, which has torn apart millions of homes, and incarcerated millions of people, the solution to the continued epidemic of drug abuse and death is not in more policing, jailing or profit-driven "addiction centers." The root cause of drug abuse lies in the capitalist system. The continued existence of the profit motive has incentivized global corporations to continue to manufacture and profit off of deadly drugs, overseen by a bought and paid for government of the oligarchy willing to turn a blind eye as entire communities are destroyed by their "medicine."



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact