

Traffic and Illegal Production of Drugs in Rural America

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of nationwide trends in the illegal traffic of methamphetamine, methcathinone, cannabis, and crack cocaine. Methamphetamine and methcathinone, both powerful stimulants, are manufactured in clandestine laboratories located primarily in the western and midwestern United States, respectively. Marijuana is grown both outdoors, in small, widely scattered plots, and indoors, with the aid of sophisticated hydroponic equipment (two additional controlled substances derived from the cannabis plant—hashish and hashish oil—are in limited demand in the United States and are not produced domestically to any significant degree). Crack is cocaine base that is converted from cocaine powder using a cheap, safe, and efficient conversion process. All of these drugs are produced, distributed, and consumed domestically, often in remote rural locations across the country (although the cocaine available in the United States is imported from South America, virtually all crack is converted locally from cocaine powder; also, even though Mexican marijuana commands a large portion of the U.S. market, the domestic production of high potency (sinsemilla) marijuana has been increasing).

METHAMPHETAMINE

Methamphetamine is a stimulant similar in some ways to adrenaline and has a pronounced stimulant effect on the central nervous system. Ingestion of stimulants may not only result in a temporary sense of exhilaration, superabundant energy, hyperactivity, extended wakefulness, and a loss of appetite, but may induce irritability, anxiety, and apprehension. According to data from the Drug Abuse Warning Network, injection remains the primary route of administration of methamphetamine.

Methamphetamine is available in varying quantities in most areas of the United States except for the northeastern and mid-Atlantic regions where, for the most part, it is encountered infrequently.

While it is also available in limited retail amounts in the southeast and somewhat larger quantities in the midwest, availability is primarily concentrated in the western and southwestern United States.

Currently, methamphetamine prices range from \$4,500 to \$25,000 per pound, \$400 to \$2,600 per ounce, and \$40 to \$150 per gram. Nationwide purity of methamphetamine at the ounce and gram levels averaged 72 percent and 68 percent, respectively, during 1994, compared to 59 percent and 56 percent, respectively, during 1993.

Most of the methamphetamine sold on the illicit market originates from clandestine laboratories operating throughout the country. These laboratories are often makeshift operations that can be easily disassembled and transported to a new location. Equipment ranging from homemade manufacturing setups to sophisticated commercial laboratory apparatus is utilized in the production process. According to Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reporting, 263 methamphetamine laboratories were seized in 1994, accounting for 86 percent of all seizures implicating clandestine, dangerous drug laboratories. Although these laboratories were confiscated in approximately 30 States, the clandestine manufacture of methamphetamine is centered primarily in the western and southwestern United States. For example, of the 263 laboratories seized, 115 (44 percent) were confiscated in California, where the overwhelming majority of illicit production occurs.

Clandestine laboratories have been built in suburban homes, garages, apartments, mobile trailers, urban dwellings, industrial areas, and even in specially designed underground vaults. Although an increasing number of these laboratories are confiscated in urban and suburban neighborhoods, the majority are seized in rural sections throughout the country. Because of the chemical odors and toxic wastes associated with the manufacturing process, isolation is often the best defense against detection. Therefore, operators commonly establish their laboratories in sparsely populated areas as a way to conceal their activities while minimizing their risk of discovery. Their operations are typically larger and more sophisticated than laboratories operating in more densely populated communities.

Clandestine laboratory operators are commonly referred to as cooks. Their knowledge of chemistry is often rudimentary at best. Typically, they have learned to manufacture methamphetamine from underground publications, through the observation of other illicit manufacturers, or during incarceration. They are often well armed

and their laboratories are occasionally equipped with devices to secure the perimeters of the production site, some designed to maim or even kill those, such as law enforcement personnel, who violate the security of the premises. Numerous weapons, including explosives, are routinely confiscated in conjunction with clandestine laboratory seizures.

Public safety and environmental concerns are of little importance to these illicit drug manufacturers. Their laboratories have caused explosions, fires, toxic fumes, and irreparable damage to human health and to the environment. Every year, a number of laboratories experience fires or explosions, which leads to their discovery. Furthermore, because some of the chemicals utilized in the manufacturing process can be absorbed through the skin and lungs, contact with or simply breathing the fumes can cause fainting, sickness, severe damage to vital organs and the central nervous system, and even death. These laboratories are, therefore, a major hazard to anyone who may come in contact with them. Additionally, operators often accumulate waste chemicals during the synthesis of clandestine drugs. They usually dispose of these and other hazardous chemical wastes by unsafe and illegal methods, often dumping them on the ground or in nearby streams and lakes, pouring them into local sewage systems or septic tanks, or burying them underground.

The amount of waste material coming from a clandestine laboratory may weigh from a few pounds to several tons, depending on the size of the laboratory and its manufacturing capabilities. In 1994 alone, it is estimated that the DEA expended approximately \$1.9 million for hazardous waste cleanup and disposal. DEA's cleanup program involves only removal of gross contamination of the site by a qualified hazardous waste disposal firm. Gross contamination includes such materials as chemical containers, contaminated apparatus, and other waste material. DEA does not become involved in any phase of remediation of the property (i.e., removal of septic systems used for disposal, removal of contaminated soil, or decontamination of property or dwellings to make them suitable for rehabilitation).

Although the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine has traditionally been associated with outlaw motorcycle gangs, independent entrepreneurs and Hispanic polydrug trafficking organizations currently manufacture and distribute the drug. Outlaw motorcycle gangs continue to play a role in the distribution of methamphetamine and influence production in certain areas. They

typically insulate themselves by financing manufacturing operations rather than becoming directly involved in drug production. However, the most noteworthy trend is currently taking place in California, where Mexican traffickers dominate the large-scale production and distribution of methamphetamine. The most significant aspect distinguishing Mexican organizations from traditional traffickers is the large volume of methamphetamine they produce. Of further significance are their organized efforts to obtain, smuggle, and broker substantial quantities of chemicals used in the manufacture of the drug. The involvement of these polydrug-trafficking organizations is altering traditional patterns of chemical acquisition and methamphetamine production in California and adjoining States. They have replaced numerous mom-and-pop type operations and also may be rapidly replacing other traditional wholesale suppliers.

Mexican violators are involved in both the purchase or brokering and distribution of chemicals as well as the operation of methamphetamine laboratories. Brokers smuggle chemicals from Mexico and, to a lesser extent, Canada because there are no laws restricting the purchase of many of the chemicals that are regulated in the United States. They also employ runners to purchase chemicals, glassware, and equipment from chemical supply firms operating in California and surrounding States. The chemicals are then resold to clandestine laboratory operators.

A degree of cooperation exists among many Mexican manufacturing organizations because links between them already have been established through their long-standing cocaine, heroin, and marijuana connections. They assist each other in obtaining chemicals and glassware and it is not uncommon for one cook to manufacture for a number of different groups. In the future, these organizations may be able to institutionalize methamphetamine production and trafficking, not only making it more organized and efficient but also utilizing their transportation networks for nationwide distribution. The DEA, therefore, considers the involvement of these polydrug-trafficking organizations to be the most significant development and potentially the greatest challenge to law enforcement concerning dangerous drugs.

METHCATHINONE

A clandestinely manufactured synthetic compound with an abuse potential equivalent to methamphetamine, known as methcathinone

or "cat" on the street, is increasingly available in parts of the United States, particularly the midwest. Methcathinone, a potent and easily manufactured stimulant, is distributed as a white to off-white, chunky, powdered material. Exhibits seized thus far have been uncut, with purity levels greater than 90 percent. It is sold usually in 1/4 gram, 1 gram, 1/8 ounce, or ounce quantities. In 1994, the price for methcathinone ranged from \$80 to \$100 per gram and \$1,000 to \$1,200 per ounce in DEA's Chicago and Detroit divisions. The most common route of administration is by nasal inhalation in doses ranging from 1/16 to 1/4 of a gram.

Clandestine laboratories producing methcathinone were first encountered in 1991 when five such sites were seized in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, a remote area of close-knit communities. However, since 1991, methcathinone laboratories have operated throughout Michigan and in several other areas in the United States. In 1994, 20 methcathinone laboratories were seized by DEA's Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, St. Louis, and Washington, DC Field Divisions. This is in comparison to 22 seized in 1993 and 6 in 1992. Almost half the production sites seized in 1994 were located in Indiana, often in rural areas.

Generally, methcathinone laboratories are smaller than those normally encountered for other dangerous drugs like methamphetamine. The majority of methcathinone laboratories seized to date were intended to produce small amounts for self-use or limited distribution. However, ease of production and potency of effects may enhance the potential for further proliferation of methcathinone laboratories and, thus, for increased availability and abuse of this substance throughout the United States.

CANNABIS

Marijuana is the most readily available and commonly used drug in the United States. Both the cannabis plant and delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the plant's psychoactive chemical, are Schedule I controlled substances under the Controlled Substances Act. Two additional controlled substances derived from the cannabis plant—hashish and hashish oil—are in limited demand in the United States and are not produced domestically to any significant degree.

The latest trend to emerge involving marijuana is the smoking of "blunts." Blunts are commercial cigars that are gutted and the tobacco

is replaced by or mixed with marijuana. Blunts filled with a combination of marijuana and other drugs, primarily phencyclidine or cocaine, are reported in several cities. Blunts first appeared in Jamaican and West Indian communities in New York and reportedly were derived from the Rastafarian preference for oversized marijuana joints called "spliffs." The smoking of blunts, once limited primarily to East Coast cities, including Atlanta, Miami, New York, and Philadelphia, is now widespread throughout the country.

Marijuana from Mexican sources, whether grown in-country or transhipped from other sources, supplies more than 50 percent of the foreign marijuana available in the United States. However, law enforcement reporting has indicated a continued increase in Colombian, Venezuelan, and possibly Jamaican marijuana shipments to the United States.

Most foreign marijuana is smuggled across the southwest border with Mexico. Mexican and Mexican-American polydrug traffickers control the wholesale transportation and distribution of marijuana, while retail distribution is not restricted to any ethnic group or organization.

Marijuana in amounts of less than 50 kilograms is smuggled by backpackers, alone or in groups. Larger amounts, frequently concealed in hidden compartments, are transported by commercial and private vehicles and even pack animals. Multihundred kilogram quantities are smuggled within legitimate cargo or hidden in compartments in larger commercial vehicles such as tractor trailers.

Domestic cultivation supplies approximately 25 percent of the marijuana available in the United States. Domestic growers most frequently plant cannabis in remote outdoor areas, often camouflaging it in surrounding vegetation. Large-scale cannabis plots are often located in forests, on public land, or among legitimate crops. In 1994, 53,588 outdoor cannabis plots were eradicated, including 4 million cultivated and 504 million wild (ditchweed) plants. (Average marijuana yield is estimated to be one pound per plant.) In 1994, the States of Alabama, Hawaii, Kentucky, Tennessee, and California accounted for approximately 60 percent of all outdoor cultivated cannabis eradicated in the United States.

The widely scattered pattern of planting cannabis outdoors generally has necessitated manual destruction. However, more States are exploring the possibility of using herbicidal spray programs targeting

large-scale, wild or cultivated cannabis sites. The decision regarding cannabis eradication/suppression technique is made by the participating State, which has sole responsibility for its individual eradication program.

The trend toward indoor marijuana production continues in the United States. It has been spurred not only by ongoing, successful law enforcement efforts to curtail outdoor cultivation but also because indoor growing provides a controlled environment conducive to the production of valuable, high-potency sinsemilla plants.

The most significant development regarding marijuana trafficking is the overall rise in potencies (percent of THC by weight) for both commercial grade and sinsemilla marijuana. Commercial-grade potency has increased by more than 500 percent since 1974, from an average of 0.85 percent to an average of 4.30 percent in 1994. A similar increase was observed among sinsemilla samples. In 1977, potency averaged 3.20 percent; by 1991, average THC potency had increased to 10.53 percent, while in 1994 sinsemilla averaged 7.41 percent. The record level of THC potency was measured at 29.86 percent from a sample seized in 1993 in Copper Center, Alaska.

This rise in THC levels is the result of selective breeding and cloning of high-potency cannabis cultivars. Most prized is sinsemilla marijuana, the unpollinated flowering tops and buds of the female cannabis plant. Rates of vegetative growth and maturation are enhanced by special fertilizers, plant hormones, steroids, insecticides, and irrigation techniques.

Sinsemilla commonly is cultivated in indoor growing operations of all types and sizes. These operations allow growers to control the pollination of female plants and to influence rates of growth. Indoor cannabis cultivators frequently employ such advanced agronomic practices as hydroponics, automatic light and fertilizer metering, and the provision of an atmosphere enriched with carbon dioxide. As a result, they are able to produce marijuana with higher THC content and, consequently, to demand higher prices. Over 3,200 indoor cultivation operations were seized in 1994. The States seizing the most indoor growing operations during that year were California, Oregon, Washington, Florida, and Wisconsin.

Marijuana prices have risen to reflect higher THC potency, especially at the high end of the price range. Commercial-grade marijuana prices rose from \$400 to \$600 per pound 10 years ago to \$285 to

\$4,000 per pound in 1994. Similarly, sinsemilla prices rose from \$1,200 to \$2,500 per pound 10 years ago to \$900 to \$9,500 per pound in 1994. The highest prices were reported in Hawaii.

CRACK COCAINE

Cocaine, the most powerful stimulant of natural origin, is extracted from the leaves of the coca plant, which has been grown in the Andean highlands since prehistoric times. In the United States, cocaine normally is distributed as a powder (a hydrochloride salt) or in its base form, called "crack." Crack is produced from cocaine powder using a cheap, safe, and efficient conversion process. This process transforms cocaine from a powder, which is either inhaled or injected by the user, into a smokeable material.

Crack is smoked either in a pipe or in tobacco or marijuana cigarettes. When crack is smoked, the psychoactive effects of cocaine are absorbed by the lungs and are immersed into the bloodstream almost instantaneously. Once in the blood, the drug is carried directly to the brain, crossing the blood-brain barrier in as little as 5 or 6 seconds. The result is a very quick and extremely intense euphoric state or high that lasts from 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the amount and purity of the crack smoked. However, the euphoric state is followed almost immediately by depression or dysphoria, called a crash, and a very strong desire to repeat the sensation by smoking more crack, leading in many cases to severe addiction.

Crack first became available in the United States during 1981 in Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, and San Diego. However, it was not until late 1985 and early 1986 that crack became widely available in these and many other cities. Since then, this highly addictive drug has surfaced in almost every city and many small towns in the United States.

Initially, many freelance individuals and small groups of retailers were responsible for crack distribution, forming a type of cottage industry. Soon, the allure of high profits gave rise to large distribution organizations that operated production-line crack factories. However, successful law enforcement disruption and prosecution, combined with the problems inherent in large-scale crack packaging operations, forced these manufacturing and distribution organizations to scale down. As a result, crack currently is distributed by numerous low- to mid-level distribution groups or individual sellers, similar in

structure to the crack market in its early stages during the 1980s. Nevertheless, some significant distribution networks under the control of criminal gangs still function at the wholesale level.

The primary effect crack distribution has had upon the drug marketplace is the virtual institutionalization of illegal drug sales. Before the onset of the crack epidemic, drug retailers and users often faced shortages or difficulties in finding reliable sources of illegal drug supplies. Today, a plentiful supply of crack is sold by an inexhaustible army of street sellers under the direction of professional distribution organizations.

A combination of factors, including saturated markets, low prices, violent competition, and effective police pressure in major urban areas, has forced some crack distribution organizations to develop new markets. Consequently, these organizations have expanded to smaller towns and rural areas across the Nation, creating many problems for local law enforcement officials and civil authorities. The larger and more advanced trafficking groups are crisscrossing the nation in an effort to find new markets.

The major crack trafficking groups operating in the United States include Jamaican "posses," street gangs like the Crips and the Bloods, and groups of Dominican and Haitian traffickers. Jamaican traffickers are moving westward from their major hubs of New York City and Miami. One area witnessing increased Jamaican posse activity is northern Florida. Here, posse members search for thriving crack markets in rural areas that are run by local gangs, then take over the operation by force.

Crips and Bloods street gangs are moving eastward from the Los Angeles area to many small towns and rural areas across the United States, particularly the southeast. For example, Shreveport, Louisiana, has evolved into an important source city for crack in the rural areas of northern Louisiana and surrounding States.

The methods employed by these street gangs can be summarized as follows. A lower-level gang member from Los Angeles will move to an area with family, friends, or other local contacts. The target area most likely will have a substantial minority population that has been spared from the deleterious effects of crack distribution and abuse. Typically, the gang member will rent two or three rooms in a motel for a few days. One room will serve as a stash room and the others will be used for retail crack sales. As a crack market develops, the

distributor will approach addicts and welfare mothers and offer them \$100 or more to use their houses or apartments as crack sales or stash houses. The distributor will recruit other locals, including juveniles, as sellers, runners, or lookouts. Using this method, a lower-level gang member, whose prospects in Los Angeles are limited, can become the leader of a crack distribution group in another town.

The national price for a rock or vial of crack ranges from as low as \$2 to as high as \$75, but generally sells for \$10 to \$50, depending upon the size, normally 1/10 to 1/2 gram. Gram prices range from \$45 to \$150. Ounce quantities can be purchased for \$475 to \$2,500. When available in kilogram quantities, crack prices are comparable to those for kilogram quantities of cocaine hydrochloride (HCl), ranging from \$17,000 to \$35,000.

Analysis of crack samples by DEA laboratories during the mid to late 1980s revealed that retail purity was consistently high, averaging 80-plus percent. Although current retail purity remains approximately at that level, sellers in some areas of the country are selling poor quality crack. Adulterants increasingly are being added to the cocaine HCl prior to its conversion to crack to increase the weight or size of the final product.

CONCLUSION

Rural America increasingly is playing a significant role in the manufacture, trafficking, and abuse of illicit drugs. Growing competition and effective law enforcement efforts in large cities have forced drug manufacturers to relocate production facilities to remote areas to evade detection and to exploit potential consumer pools. Marijuana growers and manufacturers of methamphetamine and methcathinone are taking advantage of the isolation offered by rural environments to produce illegal drugs. In addition, crack sellers from major cities are targeting rural areas, searching for new customers and less hostile distribution environments. Until recently, rural areas have been spared much of the trauma experienced in major U.S. population centers and often they are ill equipped to manage the rapid increase of drug distribution and abuse and the resulting health and social problems.

NOTE

This chapter was amended in May 1995 to include the most recent changes in drug prices and laboratory seizure data.

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