

"DRAMATIC STATISTICS SHOW EXTENT OF METH EPIDEMIC"

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CARBONDALE, Ill., July 17 -- Southern Illinois University at Carbondale issued the following news release:

Think talk of a "meth epidemic" in Southern Illinois is just jaw jackin'? Think again.

From 1997 through 2005, the total number of meth labs seized by police in Franklin, Jackson, Perry, Saline and Williamson counties increased by 19,000 percent.

That's not a typo or a misplaced comma or a dropped decimal. It's nineteen thousand percent.

"It's so dramatic that when we did our first poster presentation on our findings, we didn't include it because we thought people wouldn't believe it," said S.J. Davis, a post-doctoral fellow at Southern Illinois University Carbondale's Rehabilitation Institute, who with colleague D. Shane Koch and some graduate students combed through thousands of records from those five counties in an effort to get a handle on the problem's extent.

That's not the only dramatic fact they turned up. They also found the total number of grams seized from 1994 to 2003 in Franklin, Jackson, Saline and Williamson counties went up by 16,693.3 percent. From 2001 through 2005, meth-related treatment admissions increased in Franklin County by 7,400 percent, in Jackson County by 7,200 percent, in Saline County by 6,800 percent and in Williamson County by 2,400 percent.

D. Gent Dotson, a doctoral student who crunched the numbers for the study, said a simple fact accounts for the eye-popping stats.

"In just about all cases, you're talking about starting from zero," he noted.

"That could be because methamphetamine use wasn't on the radar yet, (the record keepers) weren't looking for it or because (the mid-'90s) were just about the time it started spreading from the West Coast to the Midwest. But whatever the reason, when you start from zero, the percentages look dramatic."

Even if the figures were less startling, they would still be significant, Davis said.

"With the increases in the number of people using, making and getting caught with methamphetamine, it's safe to call the meth problem here an epidemic," she added.

The SIUC team began pulling the information together last fall after receiving a request from local health care and substance abuse groups to take a closer look at the problem.

"They wanted to put it in perspective," Davis said.

"There's been a lot of talk for years about it, but there hasn't been good data."

Data came from the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, the 1st and 2nd Judicial Court Districts, the Illinois State Police, the Attorney General's office, the Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse, the Department of Corrections, Southern Illinois Regional Social Services,

Franklin-Williamson Human Services, the Perry County Counseling Center and a five-member focus group from the Saline County Drug Court.

"We have what the figures say and what the people say -- they're not separated," Davis said.

"While the number in the focus group might be small, this was an intact group that already knew each other and had rapport. We thought we would get more valuable information that way."

Some of what they learned contradicts popular notions about meth users. They don't, for example, just start up with meth one day out of the blue.

"Pretty much methamphetamine is for people who have already done marijuana and cocaine -- then they progress," Davis said.

Nor does the drug suck in hapless, innocent children.

"We found it's not a drug young people are using," Davis said. "Primarily it's a drug for people in their 30s and 40s."

While anyone can use meth, it's more a rural drug, in part because it's so easy to manufacture in such areas. Users are predominantly white, male and already using other drugs. They don't have much education or money; they're often unemployed, though looking for work.

The good news is that addicts can be treated, said Davis, who is working on a three-year project aimed at improving treatment methods for such people.

"I think what this report indicates is that there's a need for more -- more treatment services that are meth specific, more money for criminal justice system enforcement, and more prevention programs," she said.

The team presented its report at a Southern Illinois methamphetamine awareness conference held in May.

"There are some plans to build on this report to address the problem," Davis said.

"I would like to see it be the foundation for action all across Southern Illinois. We have a huge problem. It will take various communities and groups coming together and joining forces to address it."