



Denise Sturm is currently serving time in the Dwight Correctional Center for methamphetamine convictions with a projected release date of 2007. Sturm's husband, Eldon, is serving related charges in Danville. Sturm's children are staying with her mother.

Its toll on children

Meth's devastating effects aren't limited to the adults who take the drug

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By **JESSICA L. ABERLE** of the Journal Star

The house was on fire.

Three children and several adults remained inside. Yet even as one man suffered severe burns and the home filled with a black chemical smoke, the adults shut the windows and doors and forbade the children to leave.

They feared being caught cooking methamphetamine more than the smoke and flames - more than they feared for the safety of the kids.

"These three children were not allowed to leave the house for fear police might come," said a disgusted Tazewell County Sheriff's Detective Tim Gillespie. The children remained inside the house for more than 24 hours, forced to breathe the toxic smoke.

Elsewhere in central Illinois, a parent entrusted the care of a small child to other meth addicts while stealing anhydrous ammonia and pills for the next cook. In Fulton County, a man vented methamphetamine fumes into the room of a 14-year-old pregnant girl.

Still other parents taught their children to make the incredibly addictive, highly destructive and volatile drug, said Gillespie, who also is a member of the Federal Drug Enforcement Administration's Operation Rattlesnake, which is cracking down on the conspiracy to make meth in Tazewell County.

Police busted a young married couple in Woodford County who were so high on meth they didn't even ask about their infant and toddler who were with them at the time of the arrest. Investigators found methamphetamine manufacturing chemicals within

METH: its littlest VICTIMS

It has been seven years since methamphetamine has taken a stronghold in Illinois, but researchers are just beginning to grasp the physical, psychological and emotional toll the drug will have on children for years to come. The Journal Star examines the effect meth has had on our children and what officials are now doing to step up protection of these innocent victims.

reach of the toddler, and more stored right beside the infant's bassinet on the mobile home's filthy bedroom floor.

Another man tried to evade arrest by hiding a jar of volatile liquid meth in an infant seat under his child.

This is just a sampling of the horrors faced by central Illinois' youngest meth victims. Investigators long have known the violent nature of the drug and the risk of explosion and fire associated with its making. But in the seven years since methamphetamine has made a stronghold in Illinois - with more than 1,100 labs seized and cleaned in 2003 by state and federal agents - researchers are just beginning to grasp the physical, psychological and emotional toll the drug will have on children for years to come.

"Kids whose parents smoke (cigarettes) can develop asthma," Gillespie said. "When these kids grow up, what are they going to develop?"

State police are working with the Department of Children and Family Services to implement a protocol ensuring immediate medical care and specialized testing for minors found living in a home where meth is made or smoked or chemicals are stored.

State lawmakers are stiffening the penalties for meth users and manufacturers who cook the drug or store its chemical ingredients around children or their living space by doubling their maximum sentence. Prosecutors in central Illinois also are actively charging defendants under the year-old drug-related child endangerment law.

Investigators are asking more questions about the presence of children, their age, height and possible exposure.

Federal agents are getting involved and seeking and receiving substantial prison time - up to life without release - for methamphetamine defendants who in any way involve children in the manufacture or use of the drug. And according to U.S. Attorney Tate Chambers, about half the federal cases involve the presence of children.

"The children are victims. They can't control where they live and what their parents are exposing them to," Gillespie said. "These children don't have anyone speaking up for them. We don't know the outcome of all this exposure when they get older. ... We don't know."

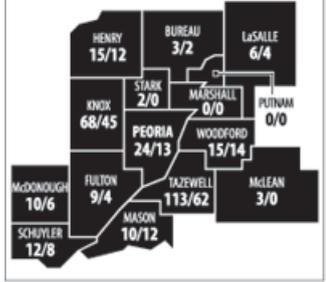
The consequences

Nationally, about 35 percent of all children found at meth lab sites test positive for the drug.

Illinois State Police Master Sgt. Bruce Liebe said this is just one of many reasons why these children are

Central Illinois meth by the numbers

Countywide estimated methamphetamine-related arrests for 2003 and first half of 2004 as depicted by the first and second numbers, respectively.



SOURCE: Area state's attorneys, sheriffs, police, MEG

"For these meth cooks it becomes an all-consuming, all-encompassing exercise. When they learn to love their children more than they love themselves, we'll be through with

considered endangered and neglected.

this problem."

"During the meth production process, there's a considerable amount of airborne methamphetamine," Liebe said. "Children are testing positive not only for the chemicals in the process, but for methamphetamine."

Knox County State's Attorney
Paul Mangieri

Meth producers also often store the toxic chemicals in the refrigerator next to milk and food. They use the same utensils to stir their concoctions that children eat with or the parents use to prepare the family meal. They put residue-covered glassware and tubing in the sink where dishes are washed.

"There's cross-contamination everywhere," Liebe said, adding that many of the chemicals also are solvents that settle on the floor. Children are closer to the floor and exposed to these chemicals at greater levels than adults. A toddler can absorb the toxic materials simply by walking across the floor barefoot.

Smaller children with faster metabolisms absorb the toxin at a higher rate, Liebe said.

These exposures result in various health issues, from respiratory ailments to liver and kidney problems. Children exposed to meth also frequently exhibit behaviors similar to attention deficit disorders, facing learning difficulties, behavioral problems and an inability to focus.

Infants born to meth-using mothers can have abnormalities of the heart, brain, spinal cord and kidneys. They can suffer strokes and brain hemorrhages before birth or be born with gastroschisis, a condition where the intestines are outside the body. Some babies are born without parts of their arms or legs.

Some chemicals used in production such as Freon can cause sudden cardiac death if inhaled. Red phosphorus used in certain meth recipes can explode on contact. Lithium metal is extremely caustic to all body tissues.

"Just on the face of it ... if you look at the characteristics of an individual that is using and what it does to their body, you can imagine how dangerous this can be for children," said Jill Manuel, DCFS deputy director of communications. "All these kids have acute and chronic medical problems."

Users also can be violent, paranoid and dangerous, Manuel said. "Being exposed to the chemicals and just being parented by someone that is on meth - that's what makes it particularly disturbing."

Gillespie said investigators have seized labs from the priciest hotel rooms in the Peoria area, causing a general public safety risk. The manufacturing process leaves a chemical film and residue that if not

professionally cleaned could sicken a small child who later stays in that room.

While a meth lab explosion at a Pekin motel in 2003 did not injure any children, it could have. Liebe said the risk of death or injury by fire and explosion is obvious as "a general rule of thumb is that one of every six labs is discovered by fire or explosion."

Fortunately to date in Illinois, DCFS and state police report no record of a child fatality or severe injury due to fire or explosion.

Gillespie said parents often try to carry on with daily activities, but after being awake anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, which is common for users, rationality and decision-making skills deteriorate drastically.

"For these meth cookers it becomes an all-consuming, all-encompassing exercise," Knox County State's Attorney Paul Mangieri said.

"When they learn to love their children more than they love themselves, we'll be through with this problem."

Illinois' meth crisis

In 1997, Illinois law enforcement officers started seeing significant numbers of meth sales, use and labs moving in from the south and west. By 2001, central Illinois officers were labeling the meth problem an epidemic.

"This drug is the worst thing that has ever happened here," said Michael Lester, state police sergeant and member of Central Illinois Taskforce. "If I was a terrorist, I wouldn't blow anything up, I'd just teach everyone to make meth and watch them destroy themselves."

Larry Hawkins, director of the Multi-County Narcotics Enforcement Group, or MEG, said the trend in his five-county area has been two-pronged. In Knox County, two different meth recipes, one that uses phosphorus and another that uses anhydrous ammonia, were brought to the area from Iowa. In Tazewell County, Hawkins said, investigators saw one man teaching a "totally different" meth recipe that spread throughout the area.

"We were getting hit from two areas," Hawkins said, explaining the problem has exploded in the past six years, with 2002 the climax. In 1998, police had no evidence of meth in Peoria, Tazewell, Stark, Marshall and Knox counties. In 1999 they seized 29 labs. Then in 2002, labs sprang up all over Tazewell and Knox counties. The MEG unit made 60 arrests in Tazewell County and an additional 18 in Knox. Lab seizures in the five-county area nearly tripled to 84. In Pekin

alone police made 149 meth-related arrests that year.

Mangieri said numbers continue to increase in Knox County, with an average of at least one meth-related arrest a week. From 2000 to 2002, the county saw a 300 percent increase in meth-related arrests. Arrests jumped another 200 percent from 2002 through the first half of 2004.

Neighboring Fulton County saw its cases escalating in 2001, with officers arresting the same individuals over and over. Sheriff Dan Daly said state charges only warranted a Class 3 or Class 4 felony with minimal jail time and a fairly low bond.

"We felt like we were just spinning our wheels," Daly said.

That's when the sheriff realized all the defendants seemed connected. "It was a conspiracy," he said, adding that's when he contacted the U.S. Attorney's Office.

U.S. Attorney Chambers took the case and agreed to look into the idea of a Fulton County methamphetamine conspiracy. "And there was," Daly said. DEA agents combined with local law enforcement in Operation Trapline. It was the first time federal conspiracy to manufacture methamphetamine charges ever were leveled. Now the concept is used nationwide.

Chambers also used federal legislation to enhance sentences by as much as 50 percent when children were involved. The average sentence from the 28 federal Fulton County indictments in 2002 reached 12 years.

"I think the numbers really show what they did for us," Daly said. In 2003, Fulton County experienced only nine meth-related arrests, and only four were made in the first half of this year.

The success of Trapline brought about Operation Rattlesnake, which continues in Tazewell County. Gillespie and fellow officers have more than 500 open files on meth suspects in that investigation. And Chambers said more covert operations detailing meth conspiracies in other besieged counties are in the works.

MEG's Hawkins said the federal prosecutions, stiffer state penalties and better reporting and enforcement may eventually put meth in central Illinois on the decline.

"We anticipate seeing a downward trend in the meth labs here in the future," he said.

State of reaction

As the use of methamphetamine has increased across

Illinois, so have DCFS neglect and abuse referrals indicating meth as the primary drug.

From 2000 to 2001, the number of reported cases more than doubled, then nearly doubled again from 2002 to 2003.

State lawmakers took steps in July 2003 to stiffen criminal penalties for making, using, or storing meth or related manufacturing chemicals around children or where they live. The drug-related child endangerment charge holds caregivers criminally liable for endangering these children. The Class 2 felony carries a prison term of three to seven years.

Knox County's Mangieri is a husband and father of 12 and doesn't hide where he stands on child abuse and neglect or the importance of removing children from those situations. When it comes to the production, sale and use of methamphetamine, the stakes are even higher, his conviction even greater.

"If I'm going to commit an error relative to the safety of the child, I'm going to err on the side of taking that child out (of the home) and not returning them until I know they're safe," Mangieri said, adding that DCFS is called in every drug arrest where a child is present.

And with the new law, the parent or caregiver should expect criminal charges to be filed as well.

Prior to the adoption of the drug-related child endangerment law, the use or presence of meth around children would serve as only one factor in determining the risk to a child. "Now with the state statute it can be the only factor," Mangieri said.

"Intuitively we could say before, 'I bet these children are being neglected,'" he said. "Now we're going to say the mere presence of meth and meth manufacturing in the home is child endangerment."

Just this month, the governor signed into law a bill adding meth manufacturing to the list of DCFS allegations for proof of abuse and neglect.

And a new Illinois State Police and DCFS protocol aimed at better serving methamphetamine's youngest victims will be formally rolled out this fall. The protocol will focus on more immediate, specialized medical care for exposed children and new investigative techniques to document the risks to those children.

"It helps us be more consistent in our ability to keep kids safe," said Cathy Smith, DCFS site administrator in Peoria. "We're never going to be able to abolish people manufacturing the drug completely. I think all we can do is improve our ability to respond to it."

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