

Methamphetamine:

Here at home in El Dorado County

By Wil Morat
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Editor's note: This is part three of a four-part series examining the methamphetamine epidemic.

The number of methamphetamine related cases received by the El Dorado County District Attorney's office have increased from 261 in 2001 to 808 in 2005.

DA Gary Lacy said that only reflects the cases in which the defendant is being charged for a crime such as possession, sale, transport or being under the influence of methamphetamine specifically.

"Often meth-related crimes won't show. We have a much greater number of crimes," he said. "Theft is probably the biggest, typically they are stealing to support their habit."

El Dorado County Sheriff Jeff Neves said a large number of crimes in EDC are directly related to the meth epidemic.

"We believe that somewhere between 60 to 80 percent of all our property crimes, such as burglary, are driven by drug use and specifically meth," he said.

El Dorado County displays a pattern of meth's growing popularity, coupled with an increase in crime,

similar to the rest of the country – especially western states.

Originally manufactured as a cold medication, amphetamine and its related derivative, methamphetamine, has plagued the western United States over the last two decades. Made with multiple toxic substances, the euphoria-inducing drug leads to serious and even deadly health problems, and creates a severe addiction that is one of the hardest to beat.

California has become the source of massive meth production over the last ten years, and the drug has begun to spread east, reaching most states except the northeast seaboard. Primarily used by rural, low-income whites – though not exclusively – the drug is now more widely used than cocaine and heroin combined.

The legal fight

With an increase in crimes related to methamphetamine in the county over the years, Neves said it's virtually impossible for law enforcement to track down every case.

"Simply from a sheriff's office response issue, we don't have the resources necessary to fully address

the impact of methamphetamine," he said. "But law enforcement has shown over the years that it can't solve drug epidemics alone. It's a cultural challenge, and a challenge for all our communities."

The Special Enforcement Detail unit of the EDC Sheriff's Department was recently temporarily shut down due to staffing shortages. The unit directly addressed problem areas such as methamphetamine.

"It is our goal that as our staffing levels improve this summer we will reinstate that team," Neves said. Despite not having the unit, the sheriff's department confiscated more than 20 pounds of meth in 2005 – and an additional 25 pounds of ephedrine – the primary ingredient used to manufacture meth.

At the front line of the fight

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McNaughton News Service file photo

THE PHOTO ABOVE SHOWS methamphetamine paraphernalia confiscated during a October, 2003 bust in El Dorado Hills.

against meth in the county is the narcotics team. Sgt. Tim Becker of the EDC Sheriff's Narcotics Unit did not respond to a request for an interview.

The primary prosecutor for the county, DA Gary Lacy, is familiar with law enforcement personnel shortages. The county hasn't added an additional deputy DA in six years – despite the sharp rise in meth-related cases. But he said that hasn't stopped his office from doing its best to uphold the law.

"We take seriously all abuse of controlled substances, but we take meth a little more seriously because of the potential serious consequences to the community," he said.

There have been large drug busts in the county. In 2004, federal agents arrested Richie Mishal, 40, of El Dorado Hills after he planned to ship more than 1,000 pounds of ephedrine to his Rancho Cordova fitness store.

EDC Superior Court Judge Eddie T. Keller has been on the bench in the county for 17 years, and worries about the growing meth problem.

"My primary concern is the kids getting caught up," he said. "It's such a devastating drug. I don't think the word is out there enough on the street. If they continue to use, it will destroy their life."

