

Meth Media

Meth is a problem, but is it a growing epidemic?

Is meth a raging epidemic or just a big problem? There's a growing debate among reporters, editors and journalism critics about whether or not the media has overly hyped meth.

The debate is especially relevant here, where county and city law enforcement boosters have said they plan to use the meth "epidemic" to push for a huge increase in jail and law enforcement funding, the largest tax increase in local history.

In a March 22 story, *Willamette Week*, which won the Pulitzer Prize last year for

media use of statistics and science, has decried media meth hype in numerous articles. *New York Times* columnist John Tierney compared the hype by drug warriors and the media to addicts "desperate for a high." U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) Administrator Karen Tandy faulted *The Oregonian* for using "outdated, incomplete data."

In the war over whether meth is a growing epidemic, the battlefield is strewn with battered statistics. What follows is a run-down of the major clashes.

room admission data is unscientific and that meth seizures have actually declined from historical highs. The DEA cites a 62 percent drop in meth super lab seizures and an 85 percent drop in Canadian border seizures of meth chemicals since 2001.

The media and others point to anecdotal stories from law enforcement, treatment providers and former addicts as evidence of an epidemic. "Tweakers are everywhere!" says one comment e-mailed to *WW*. But critics note that anecdotes aren't statistics. For example, anecdotes of horrible car accidents are easy to find, but that doesn't mean accidents are increasing.

Media have reported that 1.4 million people in the U.S. use meth, based on a federal drug use survey. But critics say that number is based on users in the last year and that only 600,000 have used meth in the past month.

The Oregonian has repeatedly reported that meth "fuels" 85 percent of the state's property crime. *WW* tracked down the statistic to a state police commander who said he arrived at the percentage by calling several district attorneys who said the percentage sounded right. But Portland State University criminology professor Kris Henning told *WW* the figure was an unreliable "joke." There hasn't been an increase in property crime to correspond to the supposed meth "epidemic." Statewide index property crime has decreased 18 percent since 1995. In Lane County, it's down 19 percent.

The media has described meth as highly addictive. But critics point to federal data and treatment experts indicating that its no

The Oregonian also reported that meth "fuels" half of the state's orphan cases. But *WW* reports that state foster-care officials say the number of orphans hasn't surged with the supposed meth "epidemic" and that without meth, half of the state's orphans wouldn't disappear. Nationally, the number of orphans is declining, even with the supposed meth epidemic.

Some media have raised alarms about a new wave of "meth babies," born addicted to the drug and disabled. But critics point out that the "crack baby" scare of the 1980s and '90s proved overblown as the drug's fetal effect was largely mild and treatable, and there are no studies showing meth is any worse. Last year a group of 92 leading drug addiction experts wrote a joint letter to the media decrying the "alarmist and unjustified" meth baby label as potentially harmful to children and families. Critics are concerned that the label could lead to unjustified child seizures and foster care placements that could do more harm than good.

Other drugs cause more damage than meth, critics say. Seven times more people seek treatment for alcohol than meth and twice as many for cocaine, according to federal studies. Alcohol also causes worse fetal damage.

So why is this statistical clash happening? *The Oregonian's* Engelberg says *WW* engaged in a "sloppy attempt to smear a competitor." Many *WW* readers agreed in e-mailed comments on the weekly's website. But many others decried *The Oregonian* for hyping the numbers and ignoring contrary evidence to attract readers and win journalism prizes.

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investigative reporting, reported that *The Oregonian* "manufactured an epidemic" using "bad statistics and a rhetoric of crisis, ultimately misleading its readers into believing they face a far greater scourge than the facts support."

The Oregonian editor who oversaw the meth coverage, Steve Engelberg, shot back with a memo to a leading journalism website. Engelberg called the *WW* article a "one-sided, intellectually dishonest, fake expose" that "meets no acceptable journalistic standard and is filled with hyperbole, sloppy reporting and the use of intentional misleading statistics."

But *WW* wasn't the first to criticize the recent deluge of "meth epidemic" coverage, first in *The Oregonian* and then in other national media, such as *Newsweek* and TV's *Frontline*, and local papers such as *The Register-Guard*. While there's little debate over whether meth is a problem or not, many have questioned whether it is a growing epidemic. Slate media critic Jack Shafer has decried meth "hysteria" in the media and called the *WW* story "brilliant." *Miami Herald* TV critic Glenn Garvin called *Frontline's* "meth epidemic" report "lunacy" and compared it to the 1937 propaganda film *Reefer Madness*.

STATS, a national group that monitors

The media has described meth as an "exploding," "plague," "raging," "epidemic." But *WW* and other critics note that two leading national studies (by the federal government and University of Michigan) show meth use is flat, and has even declined among youth in recent years. *The Oregonian* says federal studies showing flat or declining use are imprecise or miss adult users.

To justify the "epidemic" label, *The Oregonian* and other media point to federal data showing increases in the number of people receiving treatment for meth. Critics

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say this increase is due to drug courts increasingly ordering arrestees into treatment programs. But *The Oregonian* says increases in ordered treatment don't account for all the difference.

The Oregonian also points to increasing meth emergency room admissions and meth lab seizures. Critics say the meth emergency

room is more addictive than many other drugs and that only 5 percent of those who have tried meth continue using it regularly. Drug companies distributed billions of amphetamine pills, a similar drug, in the 1950s and 1960s without causing incurable problems, and fighter pilots continue to use the drug, critics say.

Some critics blame the National Association of Counties, law enforcement and treatment providers for hyping meth to win more taxpayer funding. Whatever the case, one clear reason for the continuing meth numbers war is the lack of widely accepted reliable statistics on whether the problem is growing or not. **EW**



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