

COPS BRACE FOR METH'S ARRIVAL

ADDICTIVE HOME-MADE DRUG MORE DANGEROUS THAN CRACK COCAINE, POLICE SAY

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Staff Writer

Crystal meth's popularity has spread across British Columbia over the past four years as fast as a wildfire in the interior.

Now law enforcement experts agree, York Region and the rest of the Greater Toronto Area could be the next logical destination for the dangerous drug and labs that create it.

"If it's not there now, you can bet it soon will be," said Corp. Scott Rintoul with the RCMP's drug enforcement branch in B.C. "In the 1980s there was coke. In the '90s crack. In the new millennium, it's all about crystal meth."

Crystal methamphetamine, also known as meth, speed, crank, or ice, is a cooked-up combination of over-the-counter cold medication containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine and household chemical products.

Recipes are just an Internet search away; the ingredients can be bought at any pharmacy and hardware store and a rudimentary knowledge of chemistry is all that's needed to cook up a batch in the privacy of your own home.

For police, home brew dope, similar to meth, is considered one of the biggest threats to the future of public safety, York Regional Police Chief Armand La Barge said.

"Drugs are always a concern, but these new types of drugs, the drugs you can manufacture in your home and make millions in profits, they are a definite threat," he said.

Having watched the suburban explosion of large scale marijuana grow operations and chemical ecstasy labs

in York, Chief La Barge says illicit drug trends in Canada have followed a familiar path, moving from the United States into B.C. and then across the country to the GTA.

Police fear crystal meth will follow a similar road.

The drug has already risen in popularity, moving from California to the border state of Washington, where almost 1,400 crystal meth labs were busted last year.

And it has been seen on this side of the border in ever increasing numbers

since 2000, Corp. Rintoul said. RCMP officers conducted 40 meth lab raids in 2004. There were none in 2000.

"It's probably always been here, it just wasn't getting the attention drugs like crack, cocaine and heroin were getting," he said. "Now it is."

Concern from police and health authorities alike stems from the fact crystal meth has a tendency to completely take control of a user.

"And the end result is either psychosis or death," Corp. Rintoul said. "It's an ugly drug. It's not like cocaine. This drug is a lot worse."

Smoke, snort or shoot a \$5 or \$10 bag and the high might last 12 to 16 hours. The high-energy, incredibly addictive nature of the drug sees users

binge, going without sleep and eating very little for sometimes five or six days at a time.

"Crystal meth is pretty scary," said Wende Wood, a pharmacist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. "Unlike a lot of drugs, you won't find too many recreational users. It sure has a hold on people and it can destroy lives."

On a binge, what's called tweaking, the effects of starvation and sleep deprivation

set in and aggressive behaviour and psychosis take over.

"A lot of it's just

the lack of sleep and over the short term that should go away, when the drug is out of the system and they get some rest. But if someone uses for years, there could be some permanent psychosis," Ms Wood said.

Like a lot of illicit drugs, because people tend to be multi-drug users, specific long-term effects are tough to pin down, but Ms Wood said meth can cause cardiovascular and spinal cord damage, tooth decay and gum disease.

Methamphetamine drugs have been around since the 1970s, but, like ecstasy, this latest crystal form of the drug discovered a newfound popularity in the rave scene of the late '90s.

Cheaper to produce than ecstasy, but giving ravers the same sense of unlimited energy, dealers began mixing it in with ecstasy to increase profits.

With the rave scene dying down, meth moved to clubs, the streets and eventually high schools, Corp. Rintoul said.

Highly addictive drugs like crack, cocaine and heroin have long had a foothold in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, but meth has managed to make its way into suburban and rural

communities surrounding the city.

"Places like Chilliwack, Abbotsford, Squamish, Maple Ridge," Corp. Rintoul said. "It's all over the smaller communities."

While police say organized crime figures have taken over control of most of the ecstasy and marijuana production in York and across the country, setting up large scale grows and labs, crystal meth has gone in a different direction.

"It's mostly the small mom-and-pop labs that yield about a half an ounce per cook," Corp. Rintoul said. "It's not organized crime, at least not yet."

The smaller scale of the labs doesn't render them any less dangerous, however.

Many of the solvents and acids used to cook meth are toxic, highly flammable and as combustible as anything used in an ecstasy lab.

The fact a cook may also be a user who has been high for three days doesn't help either, Corp. Rintoul said.

But the size of the labs may just be the reason police haven't seen many in York Region to date and why we may not see very many in the near future, York drug squad Det.-Sgt. Karen Noakes said.

"Of course we have concerns about any type of chemical labs being set up in York Region. But so far, the trend here has been towards the larger scale ecstasy labs. We haven't seen a lot of the mom-and-pop, small labs associated with crystal meth. The trend here is the super labs," she said.

Mom-and-pop meth labs usually service small existing addict populations, often taking over on streets and areas where crack and cocaine use once dominated.

Unlike some larger cities, York Region municipalities don't have neighbourhoods or streets wrought with drug problems, which means the ready-made market for meth is not here, Det.-Sgt. Noakes said.

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