

Crystal's Comeback

Poet Allen Ginsberg called it the "Frankenstein drug." And during its heyday in the 1960s, methamphetamine convinced lots of people he was right.

Users sought it out under the street names "crystal" or "crank" (or Methedrine™, a once-common prescription name), and found that if speed didn't always kill, it almost always did a lot of damage.

People got the message. Methamphetamine use slowed, then virtually stopped—for a while.



Crystal blues: National attention is focusing on new forms of methamphetamine.

But today crystal's back—and seemingly well its way to becoming *the* horror-show drug of choice across the country.

Why?

Users like it because it's cheap and available—and because its effects last hours longer than pricey cocaine.

But that's only part of the story.

"Crystal meth is definitely coming back," Joe Miano, an intelligence analyst for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, told **Newservice** in a recent interview.

"There are a lot of indicators—more lab seizures, lower street price, more hospital admissions—that show meth is becoming a significant drug problem again."

In places like Philadelphia, San Diego, Denver, and Dallas, it already is. It's the favorite non-cocaine stimulant on Philly streets, where users buy grams of high-quality "monster" for \$60-80, less than the

\$80-100/gram price tag attached to cocaine.

In Denver and Dallas, hospital staff are treating a flood of crystal overdose victims. In Dallas alone, the number's more than doubled every year since 1984. Nationally, it jumped 30 percent in 1987, according to Miano.

Efforts to weed out illegal meth labs scattered in the rural hill country around San Diego have done little more than dent that city's bustling methamphetamine market, one of the busiest in the nation.

In 1987, police raided 161 crystal labs in San Diego County, and the ranks of strung-out users seeking treatment has swelled nearly 500 percent in four years.

Drug treatment and arrest reports in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Portland, Oregon also show crystal on the rise. In San Francisco, speed deaths tripled from 1984-1986.

Why the new interest in an old drug? Experts point to several reasons.

A sparkling powder related to

amphetamine, crystal is considered the most super-charged stimulant around.

The drug can be inhaled or swallowed, although it's traditionally injected for its roller-coaster "rush."

Either way, effects last 6-8 hours, and that's a big factor for users eager to squeeze the biggest bang from their buck.

"A lot of people think it lasts a lot longer than cocaine," one Portland user told **Newservice**. "Around here it's going for almost as much as cocaine," he said, but "crank seems to go better with drinking or work..."

Desirability of effect is a main reason for the crystal revival.

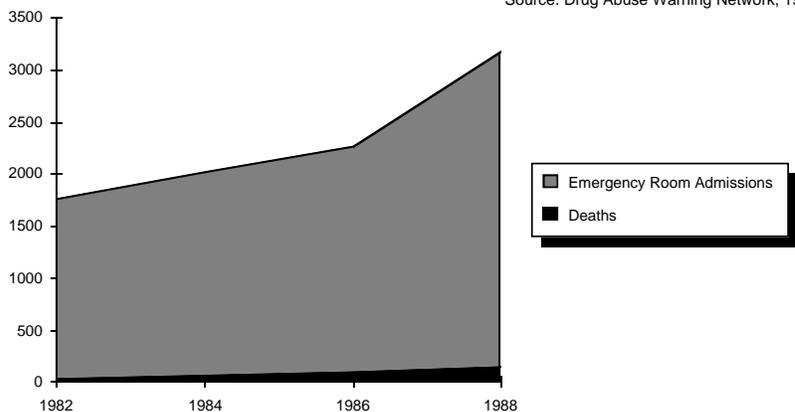
But no less important is the sheer availability of the drug. And according to the DEA's Miano, crystal's more available today than it's been in years.

"We've taken down 600-plus labs in the last year, and the overwhelming majority were making methamphetamine," he says.

DEA agents seized 667 crystal labs in 1988, nearly eight times the number

Speed: It *Still* Kills

Source: Drug Abuse Warning Network, 1989



Some Things Never Change. The rate of speed-related overdoses and deaths has closely followed increases in availability of the new crystal.

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uncovered in 1981, with operations in east Texas, southern and northern California, and Oregon producing the bulk of the nation's crystal supply.

In the minds of illegal drug chemists, methamphetamine just makes plain-old dollars and sense.

"Profit margin is so much greater than with cocaine," Miano explains, noting that elaborate cocaine smuggling and sales networks can be rolled into one crystal chemist/dealer. "An entire trafficking network can be just one person."

The lure of big money for making meth is seductive, indeed.

One DEA study estimates that less than \$5,000 in chemicals and equipment can translate into 10 pounds of crystal with a wholesale street value of \$150,000. In retail grams, the batch could bring in up to \$15 million.

But interest in speed is also being fueled by new, smokable "designer" forms of the drug, which have begun to do for the methamphetamine marketplace what "crack" did for cocaine.

And that's largely due to the efforts of clandestine chemists who cracked the code for producing crystal from legal chemical building blocks.

Old-line methamphetamine "recipes" called for *phenylacetone* (P2P) and *methylamine*, chemicals now tightly controlled under federal law.

In recent years, drug chemists switched to legal precursors (including the decongestant *ephedrine*) as the main ingredients in methamphetamine synthesis.

"Today they're using red phosphorus, hydriodic acid, sometimes with tin shavings or aluminum as a catalyst," says Joe Miano.

"But the main change we saw was from using P2P, which became a

"Profit margin is so much greater than with cocaine. An entire trafficking network can be just one person."

controlled substance in 1980, to using ephedrine."

Increasing use fueled the drive to control, and in late 1987, California legislators struck back by tightening restrictions on ephedrine sales.

It should have worked, but it didn't. Because no sooner was the ink dry on the control legislation than another "designer" form of crystal (called *methylmethamphetamine*) was making the rounds in San Diego.

The drug, California Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement agents quickly found, was a still-legal variant of crystal concocted from an uncontrolled precursor of ephedrine, called *N-methylephedrine*.

"They caught us with our law down," says Michael A. Barnes, a special agent with the BNE's Operations Support Unit in Sacramento.

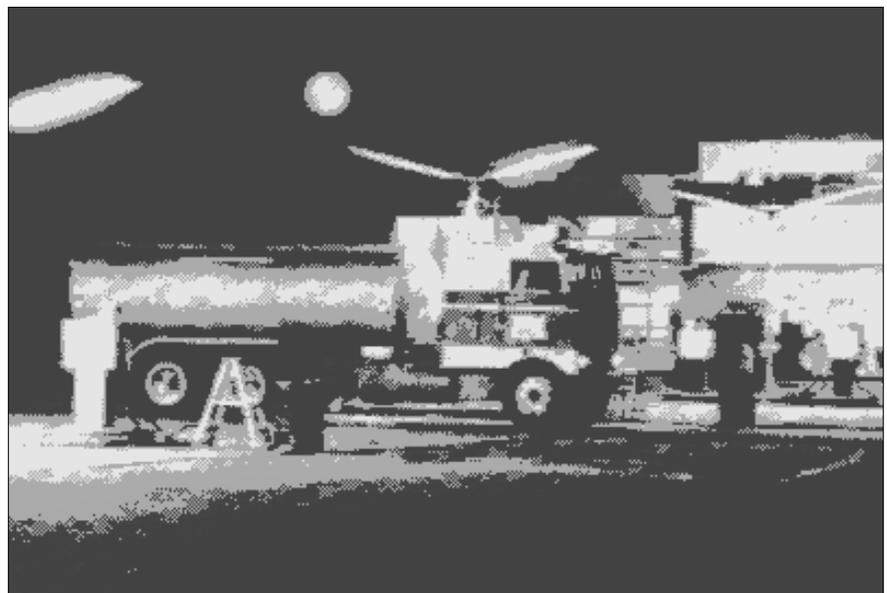
Barnes heads up California intelligence activities surrounding the new crystal analog. "We made ephedrine illegal and didn't have a law to ban the analogs," he told **Newservice**.

The new crystal isn't bad by the standards of the street.

Methylmethamphetamine, sometimes sold as "glass," is a flaky powder only a tenth as strong as standard crystal.

But unlike older incarnations, "glass" can be smoked as well as injected—which appeals to a generation that's grown up with crack and freebase and has learned to beware AIDS-related drug-needle dangers.

"Clinical analysis of methylmeth indicates that it is a weaker stimulant than methamphetamine," Barnes explains.



Traffic Traffickers. Long-distance truckers' appetite for alertness boosters has fed a booming marketplace for the new crystal. Intensified police surveillance at truck stops, such as the one shown above, has followed.

“Smoking it would give a better high, or a more comparable high to regular methamphetamine.”

That’s bad news for the new generation of users who are bringing back crystal as *the* speed of the ’80s.

Because crystal’s “Frankenstein” dangers—severe paranoia and serious physical wear and tear—are the same as ever, needle or not.

And crystal methamphetamine, in all its forms, is spreading fast.

“We’ve received reports that

Colorado, Iowa, Minnesota, and Hawaii are encountering methylmeth in large quantities,” says Mike Barnes.

“It just makes the whole problem a little harder to control, since nobody ever stopped making old-fashioned methamphetamine either.”

In California, control efforts now include new anti-analog laws banning both the drug and its precursor.

Whether the law will work is less certain. Many experts are urging strict federal regulations on sales of all

precursor chemicals as the only way of heading off epidemics of crystal and other lab-made drugs, now and in the future.

One thing is certain, though: Crystal’s back, at least for now.

Whether it lingers a little or a lot depends on how well educators are able to sell a new generation on the drug’s tangible and terrible risks.

Because the fact is that the “Frankenstein drug” can be a *real* monster.

—Christina Dye

Crystal Country: Deep in the Heart of Texas

A stranger could lose himself in the sprawling rangelands of eastern and central Texas.

And that’s just what lots of crystal chemists have in mind.

Today, a new breed of bandito—packing Bunsen burners instead of pistols—is calling the range home. And they’re transforming a collection of dusty Texas towns into one of the methamphetamine-making capitals of the country.



John Sommers

Brownwood, Texas, drug counselor John S. Sommers sees it every day.

“Crystal use here is just phenomenal,” he told

Newservice in a recent interview.

“This is Podunk, Texas—smack in the center, nothing big for miles. But there’s a tremendous business around here in methamphetamine.”

Sommers is an authority on the local business. Nearly three-fourths of his clients—white, blue-collar, young adults—use crystal.

Most make it themselves or rely on chemically-inclined friends in what’s become a boom cottage industry in home-brew speed.

“Most of our labs are set up by Brownwood residents and cooks from nearby towns,” says Sommers. “They’re not entrepreneurs. They’re just shooting what they’re making.”

And Brownwood chemists take crystal-making seriously. Sommers has identified at least six major recipes for the drug, and a dozen or so spinoffs. Each produces a particular color and a distinctive set of effects—and each inspires fierce loyalties.

“There are several recipes for methamphetamine,” says Sommers. “‘Pink’ is considered to be the best because it produces a speedy rush and a long-lasting high, but ‘good white’ and ‘yellow’ are also popular. There’s even purple meth.”

The drug’s effects are as different as its color.

“There’s one form of ‘white’ that’s actually sleep-producing,” says Sommers. “One called ‘brown’ used to be real big, but it caused an angry reaction and made users freeze

up...People would get real mad and were basically immobilized.”

Sommers treats the casualties of crystal manufacturing as often as the effects of the drug itself. “I had one client with glowing red eyes,” he recalls. “He wiped his face with mercuric acid while making up methamphetamine.”

But managing crystal’s serious downside—a syndrome known as amphetamine psychosis—is the biggest part of Sommers’ practice. “The dramatic stuff manifests itself as what would be classified as paranoid schizophrenia,” he explains.

“I’ve even had people who swear there are machines in the walls listening to their thoughts.”

Crystal’s psychological fallout hits hardest among those who inject the drug. And Sommers believes that includes most Brownwood users.

“Intranasally is passé around here,” he explains. “There’s a certain kind of individual that just gets into serious risk-taking. Shooting is the way.”

And that, he says, may ultimately explain why crystal’s emerged as king on Brownwood streets at all.