

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Mexico: The Methamphetamine Superpower

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to inform members of Texas law enforcement about the dangers of methamphetamine. This research also intends to identify who produces the majority of the drug found in the United States. This researcher believes that the majority of the members of Texas law enforcement believe that methamphetamine is a problem both locally and nationwide. However, the author also believes that Texas law enforcement has a misconception regarding whom is responsible for the production of the drug. The survey instrument used to gather the information contained in this research was distributed to 24 Texas law enforcement supervisors enrolled in Module II of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) in January of 2007. When these officers were asked whether or not they believed that methamphetamine was a significant problem facing the United States, 100% of those surveyed responded that they believed that it was. When asked the same question regarding their individual jurisdictions, 88% stated that they believed that methamphetamine was also a significant problem for them locally. Even though they perceived the drug to be a substantial problem, only 21% correctly answered that Mexican drug cartels produce the majority of the drug consumed in the U.S. The author believes that if Texas law enforcement officers have a better understanding of where methamphetamine comes from, they will be better able to attack the problem in their individual jurisdictions.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade in the United States, abuse of the illicit drug methamphetamine has reached epidemic proportions. The federal government responded to this problem by passing laws that greatly restricted the sale of precursor chemicals used to manufacture the drug. Those restrictions severely limited the domestic production of methamphetamine. This created a void in supply, while demand was at an all time high (Andrejko, 2000, para. 17). Mexican drug organizations that had previously dealt only in cocaine, heroine, and marijuana saw this as a prime opportunity to enter the business of methamphetamine production and trafficking. These groups seized this opportunity by turning their organizations into global entities. Mexican drug cartels have shown the ability to acquire large quantities of the necessary precursor chemicals on the international market. They have combined that ability with efficient production methods, and well established trafficking routes to create what is becoming a monopoly on the American methamphetamine market (Trouville, 2000, para. 4).

The purpose of this research topic is to inform members of Texas law enforcement about the dangers of methamphetamine, along with who produces the majority of the drug found in the United States. It is the belief of this author that in order to battle such a serious problem, law enforcement must be informed. The question that will be answered in this research is whether or not most Texas law enforcement officers believe that methamphetamine is a significant problem in their jurisdiction and the rest of the United States. The paper will also seek to answer whether these officers recognize by whom the majority of the methamphetamine that is consumed in the United States is produced. The research contained in this paper will provide the

information needed to fully understand the problem. From there they can look for the best ways to attack the issue within their respective jurisdictions.

There will be a number of methods of inquiry utilized during the research portion of this paper. The consulted research materials include books, articles, web sites, and congressional testimony. There will also be a survey distributed that will attempt to determine the level of understanding that Texas law enforcement has regarding the production and distribution of methamphetamine.

The anticipated outcome of this research is that most members of law enforcement will say that methamphetamine is a significant problem in their individual jurisdictions and throughout America as a whole. It is also believed that there is a misconception on the part of law enforcement about who is producing the majority of the methamphetamine being consumed in the United States. If this is the case, the research provided will attempt to give them a better understanding of the situation. From there, the officers can make their own determination on the best course of action for their respective agencies.

This research is not going to bring about an end to the methamphetamine problem in the United States or even Texas. What it will do is provide law enforcement with the most accurate facts regarding the issue. The battle against methamphetamine and other drugs is a difficult one that will likely be never ending. In order to attack the methamphetamine problem, officers must first have a better understanding of their adversary and how it enters their jurisdiction.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Methamphetamine, commonly referred to as “meth,” is a powerful synthetic stimulant that causes feelings of euphoria and intoxication, which can last between 8 and 24 hours (Ray, Oakley, & Ksir, 1990). The drug produces these effects by stimulating the release of norepinephrine and dopamine in the brain. Users can become instantly addicted the first time they experiment with the drug (Maisto, Galazio, & Connors, 1995). When an individual becomes addicted, methamphetamine users are unable to carry on a normal life without the substance (*Methamphetamine*, 2002, para. 1,2).

Historically, the main suppliers of methamphetamine throughout the United States have been independent trafficking groups made up primarily of outlaw motorcycle gangs such as the Hells Angels and the Bandidos (Hansen, 2000, para. 9). This all changed dramatically in April of 1996 when the Office of National Drug Control Policy and Department of Justice combined to issue the National Methamphetamine Strategy. The National Methamphetamine Strategy was aimed at curbing domestic production by making it more difficult for manufacturers to obtain precursor chemicals. By making it extremely difficult to procure large quantities of ephedrine, the outlaw motorcycle gangs and other American producers were unable to manufacture enough methamphetamine to satisfy the demand (*Methamphetamine, Mexican connection* 2002, para. 1).

This was a perfect opportunity for the already profitable Mexican polydrug traffickers to expand their businesses to include methamphetamine. Mexican drug suppliers were already making millions of dollars annually by providing marijuana and

heroin to American consumers. They were also transporting large amounts of cocaine across American borders in a partnership with the Columbians. When the methamphetamine market became wide open in the United States, Mexican drug organizations took advantage of the opportunity by combining new marketing techniques with efficient trafficking routes. By doing so, Mexico has essentially monopolized the American methamphetamine market, and created a money making machine that few legitimate businesses can rival (Cazenavette, 2000, para. 13).

There are four major methamphetamine trafficking groups that have historically operated out of Mexico. They are the Arellano-Felix organization, the Amado Carrillo-Fuentes organization, the Amezcua-Contreras organization, and the Caro-Quintero organization. These groups operate in an elastic system that is both fluid and flexible. Alliance shifts and hierarchy changes occur almost as a matter of routine. While the actual roles of individuals and groups can become blurred at times, there is a common structure in which each of these organizations operates within (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 8-10).

The Arellano-Felix organization is known as one of the most violent methamphetamine traffickers in Mexico. They use distribution routes that originate in San Ysidro and San Diego, and expand throughout the southwest United States. Most of their employees are gang members from Mexico, which operate on both sides of the border. They are responsible for importing hundreds of pounds of methamphetamine per shipment (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 9).

The Amado Carrillo-Fuentes organization is thought to be the most powerful of the four drug groups. They operate out of Hermosillo and Juarez, which allows them to

easily cross over into Arizona and Texas with their shipments. Their main American hub is in the Phoenix area. A recent seizure in Las Cruces, New Mexico of nearly 700 pounds of methamphetamine was traced back to the Carrillo-Fuentes cartel. This shipment was to be separated and distributed to destinations in Washington, Oklahoma, Illinois, and Georgia. The drugs were shown to have a purity level of 98% and had a street value of over \$50 million (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 9).

The Amezcua-Contreras organization is believed to be the largest producer of methamphetamine in the world. They operate primarily out of Guadalajara and Tijuana, but use Los Angeles and San Diego as their American distribution sites. Since 1992, 5 tons of the precursor chemical ephedrine has been intercepted while en route to the Amezcua-Contreras cartel. This is believed to be only a fraction of the amount of ephedrine that actually made it through to be processed into methamphetamine (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 9).

The Caro-Quintero organization has long been in the business of transporting large amounts marijuana and cocaine across U.S. borders. They have only recently expanded their business to include methamphetamine. They formed a partnership with the Arellano-Felix cartel, which allows them to operate out of a number of Mexican cities including Hermosillo, Agua Prieta, Guadalajara, and Culiacan. Their smuggling routes originate in California, Arizona, Texas, and Nevada. From those points, the methamphetamine is shipped to various locations throughout the United States (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 9).

It should be noted that these groups have experienced changes in leadership, and will continue to do so in the future, due to a variety of factors. Power struggles and

prosecutions can alter the makeup of these organizations and even threaten their ability to operate. American Federal Agents recently made a major arrest when they apprehended Francisco Javier Arellano-Felix, whose drug cartel carried his name. He was taken into custody off the coast of Baja, Mexico while deep-sea fishing with other members of the organization (“Feds,” 2006).

These groups combined years ago to make up what was known as “La Federacion,” or “The Federation,” a type of board of directors of the Mexican drug organizations. Rafael Caro-Quintero and Miguel Felix-Gallardo formed The Federation in the 1980’s with the goal of smuggling large amounts of heroin and marijuana into the United States. The groups quickly aligned themselves with Columbian cocaine manufacturers and immediately took over the drug trade throughout Mexico. Recently, they have taken over nearly the entire American methamphetamine market. The group evolved over the years into what it is now, a consortium of smuggling organizations (*DEA publications*, 2002, para. 10-11).

The members of the Federation made their early fortunes by smuggling heroin and marijuana into the United States. Once the Mexican drug organizations had established their trafficking routes, the Columbian cartels, which were having difficulty getting their cocaine into America through their traditional route of Florida, contacted them about a partnership. The Mexican drug runners agreed to transport multi-ton shipments of Columbian cocaine in exchange for cash payments. After a short period of time, the Mexicans saw the profit potential in cocaine and began to demand their payment in drugs instead of cash. They in turn set up their own distribution sites within the United States and saw their profits skyrocket. These changes in the cocaine trade, coupled

with the arrest of high-ranking members of the Columbian cartels in 1995, greatly strengthened the positions of the Mexican organizations on the international drug trade market (Cazenavette, 2000, para. 13).

When the supply of methamphetamine dried up in the 1990's, Mexican organizations used their newfound wealth and power to completely take over the U.S. market. In a 1997 interview by John Bellizzi in *Narc Profile*, Jeffery M. Ferguson, who is with the Major Narcotic Vendor Program of the Orange County District Attorney's Office was quoted as saying:

...the Mexican cartels did what every aggressive corporation does: diversify and expand. They used their huge cocaine profits to move into methamphetamine manufacture and distribution, and have all but cornered the market. Mexican cartels today are the main source of methamphetamine worldwide. (p. 4)

The Mexican organizations realized the unlimited potential in the American methamphetamine market and quickly took full advantage of the situation. They could make even more money than with cocaine, and they could do so without having to rely on South America for the product. With methamphetamine, they could control the entire process from start to finish. They could control everything from production to distribution and collect 100% of the profits (Bellizzi, 1997).

The major Mexican drug organizations operate large-scale methamphetamine labs both in Mexico and the United States. The labs in the United States need to be mobile in order to elude law enforcement, so they are generally much smaller than the locations in Mexico. The U.S. labs only produce approximately 10-15 pounds of

methamphetamine, every other day using the ephedrine reduction method. These locations, which are primarily located in the southwest United States, are usually abandoned after only a few production processes. Manufacturers and law enforcement alike commonly refer to these production processes as “cooks” (Weaver, 2002).

The lab sites located in Mexico are generally much larger in scale. The Mexican lab locations are much more secure facilities than the ones operating in the United States. They are usually located on a ranch or some other piece of family owned land and are permanent positions that operate year round. These “super labs” are capable of producing anywhere from 150-200 pounds of methamphetamine every other day (Weaver 3,4). Although the Mexican drug laboratories account for only 5%-20% of the total number of labs in operation, they produce an estimated 80-90% of the U.S. methamphetamine supply (Cazenavette, 2000, para. 15).

When a permanent lab site is established in Mexico, cartel leaders must chose the personnel that will take part in the manufacturing process. There are four main roles that are required in the process of methamphetamine production. Those roles are the foreman, cooker, lab workers, and security personnel. All of the workers present at the cook are employed by the same organization, and no one is permitted to leave the site until the entire process has been completed (Weaver, 2002).

The foreman is always a highly skilled and trusted individual within the organization. He is in charge of overseeing the entire production process, and is usually a former cook himself. The foreman is usually a well-paid, high-ranking member of the organization. The cartel leader himself may even fill the role of foreman from time to time (Weaver, 2002).

The cook is also a well-trusted individual within the organization. He is a highly skilled person that oversees all of the “hands on” portions of the methamphetamine production process. His job is to instruct lab workers, and to guide everyone through the manufacturing process. The cook will usually perform the majority of the sensitive tasks himself (Weaver, 2002).

The lab workers are employed to conduct the menial tasks and hard labor. They are the least trusted individuals in the manufacturing process. There are a number of serious health hazards associated with the production of methamphetamine. The lab workers are hired to perform all of the hazardous and physically demanding assignments in the process (Weaver, 2002).

The security personnel are on scene to guard the site against intrusion by other drug organizations and legitimate law enforcement. They are also there to prevent anyone from leaving the location while the cooking process is taking place. The individuals employed as security personnel are moderately trusted, but are considered replaceable and expendable. They are generally selected for their ability to carry out violence without hesitation (Weaver, 2002).

Once the organization has completed the methamphetamine manufacturing process, they must find a way to get the finished product into the United States. The drugs are usually smuggled across the border in automobiles. These cars are often equipped with hidden compartments that can be activated electronically to conceal the drugs. Occasionally, larger methamphetamine shipments will be done via airplane or tractor-trailer. The smugglers know what law enforcement officers are looking for at border check points and do their best to avoid these patterns of behavior. The

organizations calculate the likelihood of detection, and do everything possible to minimize the risk of losing a shipment (Weaver, 2002). Since the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), border traffic has escalated significantly, further decreasing the likelihood of detection (Macko, 1997).

Once the methamphetamine is inside the United States, the organizations are able to employ a drug distribution network that has been in place for decades. They have simply added methamphetamine to the list of drugs that they are able to provide to American consumers (Cazenavette, 2000, para.15). The Mexican organizations basically put the domestic methamphetamine producers out of business. The outlaw motorcycle gangs that were making and selling smaller quantities of the drug found that the Mexican product was cheaper, and of a higher quality than what they were able to produce themselves. The outlaw gang members have even been observed purchasing methamphetamine from the Mexican organizations and then reselling it at street level. The Mexican Mafia also serves as a distribution network inside American prisons (Weaver, 2002).

Once the organization has sold the methamphetamine inside the United States, they are left holding an enormous amount of cash. At this point, they simply smuggle the cash back across the border to Mexico the same way they got the drugs in, generally using automobiles. Mexican drug groups have a deep distrust of banks and therefore choose to invest in property or hold onto the large sums of cash. This cash is then hidden in various locations, sometimes even buried by the millions in large containers (Weaver, 2002).

Methamphetamine, and its connection to Mexico, creates a considerable challenge for American law enforcement. U.S restrictions on precursor chemicals generated a tremendous opportunity for the Mexican drug cartels (Andrejko, 2000, para. 7). The cartels seized this opportunity and have created a near monopoly on the American methamphetamine market (Trouville, 2000, para. 4). These factors will likely continue to test law enforcement for many years to come.

METHODOLOGY

The question that will be answered in this research paper is whether or not most Texas law enforcement officers believe that methamphetamine is a significant problem in their jurisdiction and the rest of the United States. The research will also seek to answer whether or not these officers recognize who is producing the majority of the methamphetamine that is consumed in the United States. The author of this research believes that the majority of respondents will say that methamphetamine is a significant problem both in their individual jurisdictions, and at the national level. It is also anticipated that the research will show that there is a great misconception on the part of law enforcement regarding the individuals responsible for the production of most of the methamphetamine being consumed in America. Ideally, the information contained in this research will help to provide the information needed to fully understand the problem of methamphetamine production and distribution.

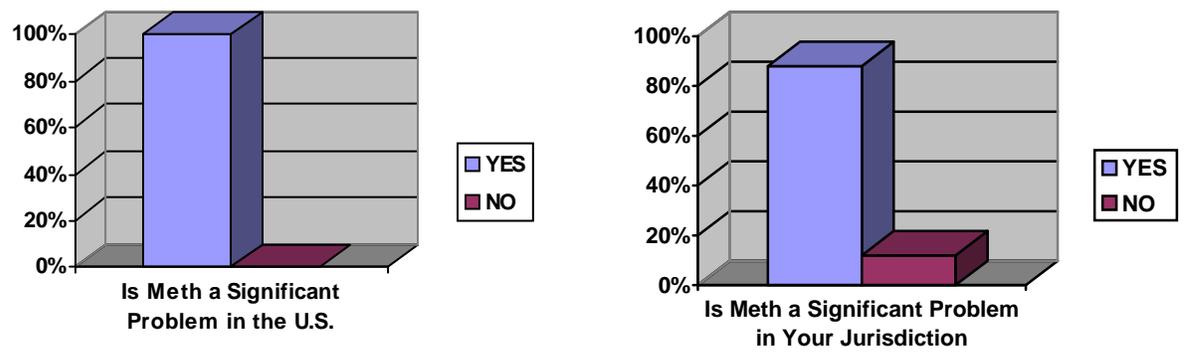
The instrument used to gather the information contained in this section will be a questionnaire distributed to 24 members of a Module II class of the Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) in January of 2007. The survey was given to supervisors representing various law enforcement agencies located throughout Texas.

All 24 surveys were returned and filled out completely. The information obtained from the surveys will show whether the respondents believe that methamphetamine is a substantial problem in the United States and their respective jurisdictions. It will also show their beliefs regarding the individuals or organizations responsible for producing the majority of drug found in the United States.

FINDINGS

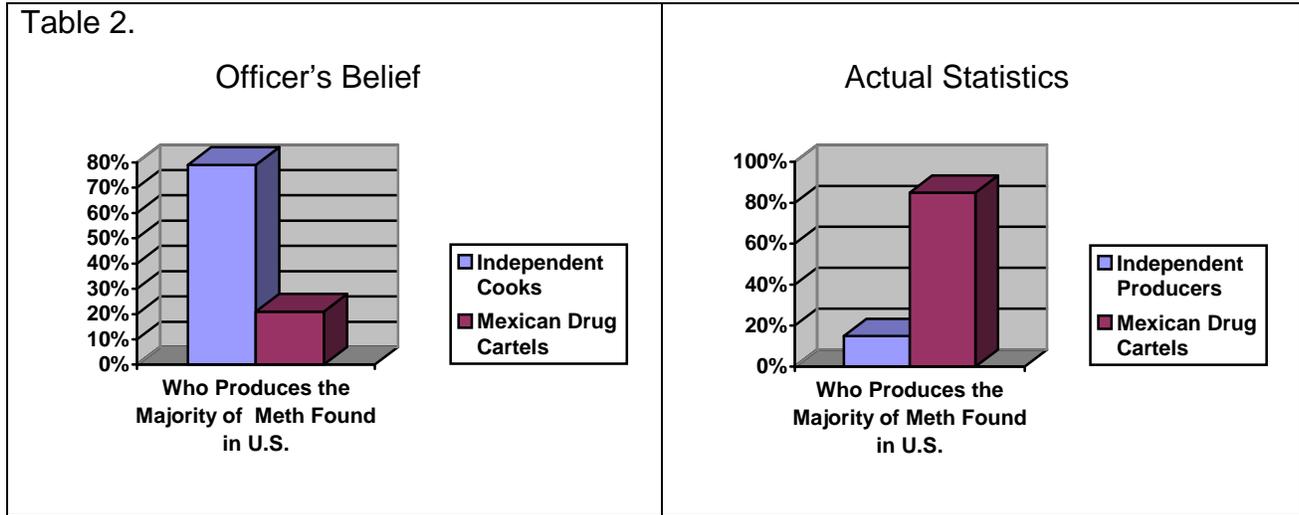
When Texas law enforcement officers were asked whether they believed that methamphetamine was a significant problem facing the United States, 100% of those surveyed responded that they believed that it was. When asked the same question regarding their individual jurisdictions, 88% stated that they believed that methamphetamine was also a significant problem for them locally (See Table 1.) The overwhelmingly high percentage of officers that view methamphetamine in these terms emphasizes the importance of having a better understanding of the drug and where it comes from.

Table 1.



The survey also asked the question of whether the officers believed that the majority of the methamphetamine found in the United States was produced by large-

scale independent cooks, small-scale independent cooks, or Mexican drug cartels. Large-scale was defined as 2 pounds of the drug per cook or more, and small-scale was defined as 2 pounds or less. Sixty-seven percent of the officers indicated that they believed that the majority of the methamphetamine consumed in America was manufactured by small-scale independent cooks. Twelve percent stated the majority was produced by large-scale cooks. Only 21% selected the correct answer which was that the Mexican drug cartels are responsible for producing the majority of the methamphetamine found in the U.S. (See Table 2.)



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research is to inform members of Texas law enforcement about the dangers of methamphetamine, along with who is responsible for the production of the drug. It is the belief of this author that in order to battle such a serious problem, law enforcement must be informed about such issues. The question this paper attempted to answer was whether or not most Texas law enforcement officers believe that methamphetamine is a significant problem in their jurisdiction and the rest

of the United States. The research also tried to answer the question of whether or not these officers recognize who is manufacturing the majority of the methamphetamine that is consumed in the United States.

The researcher hypothesized that most members of Texas law enforcement would say that methamphetamine was a significant problem in their individual jurisdictions and throughout America as a whole. The researcher also believed that there was a tremendous misconception among these officers as to where the majority of the methamphetamine consumed in the United States was manufactured.

The results of the survey conducted reinforced the initial hypothesis. Almost all of the officers surveyed stated that they believed that methamphetamine was a considerable problem. They also stated that they believed that independent cooks as opposed to Mexican drug cartels produced the majority of the methamphetamine found in the U.S. These findings overwhelmingly supported the author's hypothesis.

This study was limited somewhat in that all of the survey respondents were from agencies located within the state of Texas. This provides a great overview of the prevailing attitudes that would be found among Texas peace officers, but lacks the geographic diversity of a nationwide survey. Since the target audience of this paper is Texas law enforcement the discussion topic is not greatly complicated by these issues.

This research was not written in an attempt to bring about an end to the methamphetamine problem. It was intended to give Texas law enforcement officers a better understanding of a drug that most consider a legitimate problem in their jurisdiction. Ideally, officers will be able to formulate more appropriate methods in which

to attack the problems that inevitably accompany methamphetamine when given a better awareness about where it comes from.

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