



## **First Responders Struggling to Help Patients as Meth Use Surges**

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Public health officials have focused on the opioid epidemic in recent years because thousands of Americans are still dying to overdose annually. But other epidemics are quietly brewing. For example, there has been a rise in overdose deaths related to stimulants like cocaine recently.

As overwhelming as it may be, it only goes to show that the drug crisis is even more complex than it already seems. And with the use of methamphetamine also surging in certain parts of the US, first responders are struggling to keep up with the number of patients in need of treatment.

Across the country, overdose deaths involving methamphetamine more than quadrupled from 2011 to 2017. Admissions to treatment facilities for meth increased by 17 percent during this period. Hospitalizations related to meth jumped by about 245 percent from 2008 to 2015, making it difficult for first responders to handle the rising need.

Throughout the West and Midwest, 70 percent of local law enforcement agencies say that meth is their biggest drug threat.

Meanwhile, policymakers in Washington, D.C. haven't kept up. While the opioid epidemic is the biggest public health crisis at the moment, it also means that the bulk of funding and attention are being given to opioids.

"But when you're in D.C., where people are making decisions about how to deploy resources, those stories are very much muffled by the much louder story about the opioid epidemic," said Steve Shoptaw, an addiction psychologist at UCLA in Los Angeles. Shoptaw hears one story after another about meth destroying people's lives.

The stimulant drug is a white, bitter-tasting crystalline powder that dissolves in water or alcohol. It is snorted, smoked, or directly injected into the bloodstream. The drug is highly potent and can easily cause addiction.

Even within drug treatment circles, there is a divide between those dealing with the opioid epidemic and those struggling with meth. Opioid addiction advocates are afraid that the resources they need will be taken away if meth advocates demand too much.

"The bottom line is, as Americans, we have just so much tolerance to deal with addiction," Shoptaw says. "And if the opioid users have taken that tolerance then there's no more."

San Francisco lawmakers are now trying to get a grip on how much meth is affecting the city's public health system.

"It's something we really have to interrupt," said San Francisco District 8 Supervisor Rafael Mandelman, who will co-chair a task force to combat the meth epidemic. "Over time, this does lasting damage to people's brains. If they do not have an underlying medical condition at the start, by the end, they will."

Since 2011, emergency room visits related to meth in San Francisco have jumped 600 percent to 1,965 visits in 2016, the last year for which emergency room data is available. Admissions to the hospital are up 400 percent to 193.

At San Francisco General Hospital, 47 percent of the 7,000 annual psychiatric emergency visits last year were people who were high on meth.

"They can look so similar to someone that's experiencing chronic schizophrenia," said Dr. Anton Nigusse Bland, medical director of psychiatric emergency services at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital. "It's almost indistinguishable at that moment."

A person who is having a meth-induced psychosis can become paranoid or anxious. Their perception of their environment will be off. Click the link to see Oakland's top rehab placement programs.

Doctors sometimes have to administer a benzodiazepine to calm individuals down when they are agitated and affected by meth. Otherwise, the treatment for this is just waiting 12 to 16 hours for the meth to wear off, and the psychosis should be gone.

?Their thoughts are more organized, they're able to maintain adequate clothing. They're eating, they're communicating,? Bland said. ?The improvement in the person is rather dramatic because it happens so quickly.?

Many people recovering from meth addiction use their memories of meth-induced psychosis to motivate themselves to stay sober.

If someone in the family is struggling with opioid or alcohol addiction, it is important to seek help. A combination of medical detox and behavioral therapy can go a long way in the fight against drug abuse. But because every individual is affected by addiction differently, a comprehensive program tailored to their specific needs is necessary. Look for a nearby addiction treatment facility today and find out how drug treatment programs work.

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