

The Pueblo Chieftain

Your print and online news source for Southern Colorado

Published: March 16, 2009

Labs dwindle, but meth stays strong in Pueblo

It means the drug is stronger and made in Mexico



Clandestine methamphetamine laboratories have nearly vanished in Pueblo, but the availability of the highly addictive drug has remained consistent, according to local law enforcement.

By **NICK BONHAM**
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

"It's still here. It's just not being made here," said Charlene Graham, bureau chief of law enforcement for the Pueblo County Sheriff's Department.

After investigating 20 home meth labs from 2003-04, the Pueblo Police Department hasn't raided an active lab since.

"We had two small labs dumped out west of PMI (now the Pueblo Honor Farm) this year, but we weren't able to find who dumped them," said Capt. Frank Holderman of the Pueblo Police Department's narcotic unit.

Outside city limits, the sheriff's department last confiscated a portable meth lab on 27th Lane in 2007. Before that, the last active meth lab deputies investigated was at a house in Boone in 2002.

According to the National Clandestine Laboratory Database, the number of meth labs that have been raided statewide dropped from 450 in 2002 to 46 in 2007.

Investigators say the decrease in home labs is the result of stiffer penalties and prosecution, increases in drug-fighting grants and drug task forces.

But meth is still on local streets and stronger than before, primarily manufactured in super labs in Mexico and transported up from the border along Interstate 25.

"We're seeing more quality meth, a lot of pure meth," Holderman said. Because

of that and the fact that meth is primarily being imported now, Holderman said the street value of meth has rocketed from \$900 an ounce to \$2,000.

The chemical ingredients of meth are toxic and flammable, which make home meth labs dangerous health risks in residential neighborhoods. In that sense, the decrease in labs is good, but the demand for the drug and its higher cost precipitates other crimes.

"I think the biggest residual of meth use is the other crimes it produces - ID theft, metal thefts, car break-ins, crimes of opportunity," said Sheriff Kirk Taylor said.

In terms of meth use by people older than 12 over the past year, Colorado ranks eighth in the country, according to the Colorado Meth Project, a privately funded prevention program that uses publicity and public announcements to combat initial meth use.

Meth treatment centers in Colorado saw a 10 percent decline from 2007-08, according to a Denver newspaper.

The Colorado Meth Project is new to the state and is coming to Pueblo, said Sheriff Taylor.

"It has nothing to do with enforcement, but they put out pretty strong ads," Taylor said. "There are only four states doing this right now, and the biggest thing is community involvement. This program started in Montana in 2005, when the state was No. 5 in country in meth use. Now it's 39th."

Taylor said members of the Colorado Meth Project will host a meeting and presentation with Pueblo community, business and education leaders on March 23 at the Pueblo Convention Center.

With the amount of resources and attention diverted to meth, police say cocaine is making a surge.

"The drug of choice right now is cocaine," Holderman said. "We're seeing good quality cocaine, too,

coming up the I-25 corridor."

Holderman said that in the past few weeks, his unit has confiscated \$425,000 worth of cocaine in Pueblo.

METH LAB RAIDS

Active meth labs raided in Pueblo County:

- 2003 8
- 2004 12
- 2005 0
- 2006 0
- 2007 1
- 2008 0

- Source: Pueblo Police Department and Pueblo County Sheriff's Department