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Officials Across U.S. Describe Drug Woes

By [KATE ZERNIKE](#)

Local officials from across the country yesterday declared methamphetamine the nation's leading law enforcement scourge - a more insidious drug problem than cocaine - and blamed it for crowding jails and fueling increases in theft and violence, as well as for a host of social welfare problems.

Officials from the National Association of Counties, releasing results from a survey of 500 local officials nationwide, argued that Washington's focus on terrorism and domestic security had diverted money and attention from the methamphetamine problem in the states.

They pleaded with lawmakers to restore financing for an \$804 million drug-fighting program that the group said had been proposed for elimination in the 2006 federal budget, and said the Bush administration had focused its drug-fighting efforts too much on marijuana and not enough on methamphetamine.

"This is a national problem that requires national leadership," Angelo Kyle, the president of the association and a member of the Board of Commissioners in Lake County, Ill., north of Chicago, said at a news conference in Washington that was called to draw attention to the problem.

While methamphetamine has begun to move into some cities, it has particularly devastated rural areas in the last several years. It is cheap and easy to make using chemicals commonly found in cold medicine or on farms, and makeshift production laboratories have sprung up in barns and houses. Officials said yesterday that they had even discovered small portable laboratories in suitcases.

The ingredients are highly toxic and highly flammable, often resulting in serious explosions. And the drug itself, which is smoked, inhaled or injected, is extremely addictive, producing a high that lasts several hours and leading to binges that often last days or even weeks.

Of 500 law enforcement agencies in 45 states, 87 percent reported increases in methamphetamine-related arrests in the last three years, and 62 percent reported increases in laboratory seizures.

Fifty-eight percent said methamphetamine was their largest drug problem. Nineteen percent said cocaine was, 17 percent said marijuana and 3 percent said heroin.

The problem is seen as particularly bad in the Southwest, where 76 percent of counties surveyed said methamphetamine was their largest drug problem; in the Pacific Northwest, where 75 percent of those surveyed said it was; and in the Upper Midwest, where 67 percent of county officials declared methamphetamine their worst drug problem.

Seventy percent of counties reported increases in robberies and burglaries because of methamphetamine; 62 percent reported increases in domestic violence; 53 percent reported an increase in assaults; and 27 reported an increase in identity theft.

Half the counties surveyed said one in five inmates were in jail because of methamphetamine crimes. Many counties reported that half their jail populations were incarcerated because of methamphetamine.

The officials said that reports of child abuse had increased as well, with many children neglected while their parents binged and then slept off the high for several days.

"Meth abuse is ruining lives and families and filling our jails," said Bill Hansell, president-elect of the association and a commissioner from Umatilla County, Ore., which has led that state in laboratory seizures.

The officials called yesterday for the restoration of the federal Justice Assistance Program, the \$804 million program that helped finance drug-fighting efforts between different jurisdictions. "With the elimination of that program, that really stifles us from being able to combat this epidemic drug," Mr. Kyle said.

The officials also called for more money for treatment and said the Bush administration should shift its antidrug efforts, which have emphasized preventing marijuana use among teenagers.

"We're not saying that that's misplaced or that they shouldn't be doing this," said Larry Naake, executive director of the association, "but we think that there is now an epidemic that needs to get their attention because it's just as serious, if not more serious, because of the overall consequences of it."