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Poll: 1 in 6 young Arizonans tried meth

By Howard Fischer
Capitol Media Services

One in six Arizonans age 18 to 24 has tried methamphetamine according to a new statewide survey. But it might have more to do with curiosity than lifestyle or habit: The telephone poll found that only 4 percent in that age group admitted to using meth in the last year.

Attorney General Terry Goddard said that's still twice the national average. He said that's why he and officials from several counties have banded together to run commercials and buy billboard space to try to scare Arizona teens from trying meth even once.

But the survey shows there's a tricky balance between instilling legitimate fear about the drug and making claims teens will dismiss as ridiculous.

For example, the poll shows that 95 percent of young adults believe trying meth even once can result in addiction. That, he said, is true.

But 84 percent also believe one-time use will lead to tooth decay.

"They know among their peers (who have tried meth) that hasn't happened," Goddard said.

The survey, conducted for the Arizona Meth Project, also found that 53 percent of young adults say it is easy for them to get meth.

Among those in the 12-17 age group, 4 percent reported trying meth once. And 37 percent in that age group said they easily could obtain the drug.

More than nine out of 10 believe a single use can lead to paranoia, violence, brain damage, having sex with someone they don't want to, or death.

But more than half of young adults and a third of younger teens said meth helps people lose weight. A double-digit percentage of both age groups said they believe the drug provides energy, helps deal with boredom and helps people escape problems.

Cindy Schaider, coordinator of the Casa Grande Alliance, said that contradiction reflects human nature.

"Who of us doesn't know where heart disease comes from?" asked Schaider, whose group is dealing with the meth problem in Central Arizona. "We know we shouldn't smoke, we know we shouldn't be overweight, we all should

exercise more."

But she said the attitude is "That doesn't apply to me."

Dale Guthrie, a Mesa pediatrician said he finds it disturbing that so many people believe meth is a good way to lose weight. He said the resulting weight loss comes through malnutrition.

Goddard said the Meth Project is trying to provide accurate information in hopes of curbing meth use. But he conceded that is a very tricky balance.

"Nobody wants to have the 'Reefer Madness' reaction, where young people look at the ads and say, 'I know that's not true and therefore I'll discount everything that you say,'" Goddard said. That 1936 film was a fictional account of what happens to high school students - including rape and insanity - when they are lured to try marijuana.

He said many teens who haven't tried meth have friends who have. And he said they know some of the things claimed about what happens to someone who uses meth just once are not true.

Schaider said the Meth Project is trying to avoid that in their radio ads by actually using the voices of people who have used meth who are telling their own stories. And she said the TV commercials and billboards, while using actors, are based on real stories.

METH USE

Percent who agree with statements about meth:

Statement / 12-17 age group / 18-24 age group

Helps you lose weight / 34% / 55%

Makes you feel euphoric or very happy / 18% / 31%

Gives you energy / 16% / 36%

Helps you deal with boredom / 14% / 24%

Helps you escape your problems / 12% / 21%

Helps you study / 6% / 8%

Makes you more popular / 5% / 10%

Makes you feel attractive / 5% / 9%

Makes you intelligent / 2% / 4%

Perceived risks of trying meth just once:

Statement / 12-17 age group / 18-24 age group

Negative influence on younger sibling / 97% / 94%

Getting hooked / 96% / 95%

Losing control / 96% / 93%

Becoming violent / 95% / 90%

Becoming paranoid / 94% / 95%

Dying / 91% / 89%

Having sex with someone you don't want to / 90% / 90%

Stealing / 90% / 90%

Suffering tooth decay / 90% / 84%

-- Source: Arizona Meth Project

Telephone survey of 400 teens age 12-17 and 400 young adults 18-24 conducted March 22 to April 17; margin of error 5 percent.



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