Meth ads talk to teens in Spanish

- Story Highlights
- Meth Project has disturbing ads to wake up kids to the dangers of meth
- Spanish ads in the West feature young Latinos sharing meth nightmares
- Meth called a major threat in rural America because it is cheap and easy to make

(CNN) -- It's a snapshot meant to shock: a bloodied woman hunched over with this caption underneath, "My mother knew I'd never hurt her, then she got in the way."

The Meth Project has made a name for itself with graphic, disturbing print and broadcast ads meant to wake up kids to the dangers of methamphetamine addiction. Another ad shows a filthy urinal with the caption, "No one thinks they'll lose their virginity here. Meth will change that."

The nonprofit organization said it's baring the ugly truth about what the Drug Enforcement Administration calls the most dangerous drug problem of small-town America.

Now the Meth Project is targeting a new audience: the growing population of Spanish-speaking teens in the Western United States. It's releasing television commercials in Spanish in Arizona and radio ads throughout the West featuring young Latino addicts sharing real-life meth nightmares. Nothing is lost in translation.

In Idaho, one of the Spanish radio voices belongs to recovering addict Aucensio Flores. In his ad, Flores said he first tried meth at 15 and headed on a downward spiral, adding: "I think it affected my brain. I have bad thoughts and I only want to do bad things, such as hurt people. I think I am going crazy."

Flores said meth deadened his conscience, emboldened him and kept him up all night with an edgy high. Meth made it easier, he said, to become sucked into a world of crime and gangs. Flores remembers beating up and robbing people just walking down the street and taking part in drive-by shootings, including one in which "I shot 17 shots into the house and then I walked around the block and back into the car and just left."

Meth made him feel "big and bad," said Flores, who never imagined being locked up. He's serving time at the Nampa Juvenile Correction Center in Idaho for grand theft, possession of a weapon by a minor, and drug possession.

Flores' drug rehabilitation counselor, Colleen Foster, said that up to 40 percent of juveniles in the Nampa facility have a history of meth addiction. She said meth takes over their lives.

"It starts to destroy their value system. It eats away at every aspect of their life: family, responsibility to community, responsibility to education, responsibility to themselves even," Foster said. "It just eats away at all that until they have no value system left, that the only thing they're doing is seeking for that high."

Foster supports the Meth Project's Spanish ad campaign because, she said, denial of the problem extends to teenagers and parents in all populations -- including Latinos. She said she thinks outreach needs to be better tailored

for the growing Latino community in Idaho.

Foster also counsels Yair Perez, a recovering meth addict who served time for robbery and was released recently from the juvenile detention center.

"When I was coming down from meth, I would feel bad. You know, I threw up and I couldn't eat. Even if I was hungry, I couldn't eat," Perez said. "You know, I would just stay in my room and not talk to anyone, because they would make me mad when they talked to me."

While on meth, Perez said, he also developed frightening ulcerlike sores on his body and suffered from an erratic heartbeat.

Still, he said, his cravings for the drug persist and he knows staying clean won't be easy. He's gotten a job at a fast-food restaurant, is reconnecting with his family and has recorded a Spanish radio ad for the Meth Project. Perez said he hopes to reach young Latinos who aren't getting the message about meth in English.

"They might understand a little bit of it or half of it," he said. "But if they hear it ... in their own language ... the way they were born and they were raised, you know, speaking Spanish, then maybe they will pay a little more attention to it and maybe think about it, instead of doing it."

Idaho Meth Project volunteer Miguel Mouw agrees, saying that "in the Hispanic community, there's just a lack of education, a lack of treatment and resources, there's a lack of support, because there are some communication gaps."

Mouw, also a recovering meth addict, speaks in classrooms throughout Idaho and at community events. He said he thinks the graphic nature of the ads is needed to drive home the dangers of meth.

"I've seen people lose everything, you know, from their toes to the top of the head, either through death or maybe it's the sores or the scabs [affecting] the teeth or the eyes," he said. "The list is endless. It really is."

Drug officials say meth -- also known as chalk, crank, crystal, glass, ice or speed -- has been a major threat in rural America because it is cheap and easy to make. Traffickers mix drugs bought over the counter with common ingredients, according to the DEA. Twelve- to 14-year-olds who live in small towns are more than twice as likely to use meth than those who live in larger cities, the agency said.

The Meth Project began in 2005 in what was then the heartland of meth: Montana. Government leaders there credit the effort with large declines in meth use, including a 45 percent drop in teen use since its ads first appeared. The ad campaign has since spread to a half-dozen other states, including Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois and Wyoming. Program organizers said they research and tailor their campaigns for each new state.

But not everyone is convinced of the program's effectiveness.

David Erceg-Hurn, a researcher and critic of the Meth Project, said: "There is the potential for boomerang effects with these ads. Some teenagers react negatively to graphic advertising. These people don't like 'being told how to behave' by the ads and may rebel against them."

The Meth Project is funded through private donations and receives millions of dollars in federal and state grants.

Erceg-Hurn said he thinks those dollars could be put to better use.

As for the Spanish ad campaign, he said: "I prefer the radio ads to the print and television ads. They're not so over the top. I like that the radio ads feature real former users rather than actors. This makes them seem more realistic. A problem is still that they don't provide any information about how to quit or avoid using meth. Teenagers need practical skills and information."

The Spanish ad campaign in Idaho is too new for analysis of widespread impact. Organizers said they hope for more reactions such as that of high school student Cindy Rodriguez.

Rodriguez, who moved to Idaho from Guatemala, said she and her parents have been listening to the radio ads together.

"My parents, we didn't see a lot of drugs during my time in Guatemala. So we didn't know what the drugs are and what they do," she said. "So what my parents would do, like when they would listen to the radio, they were like, 'Oh, you should listen to this, because this is what I want you to learn.' "

Rodriguez said she was prepared when peers offered her meth.

"They were like, 'Oh, you should do this, so that way you could be a little bit cooler or you're with us. You need to do this.' I'm like, no ... you know, cause I'd heard about it."