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Survey shows Idaho teens see meth as beneficial

Survey that shows youth at 'grave risk' also indicates that education, communication can prevent abuse of the drug.

Too many Idaho teens see little to no risk in trying meth and have not tried to dissuade friends from taking meth. The 2007 findings released Tuesday from the first-ever statewide Idaho Meth Use & Attitudes Survey indicate a disturbing level of social acceptance of the drug in Idaho.

"Our youth are at grave risk," said Brent Reinke, director of the Idaho Department of Correction and chairman of the Idaho Criminal Justice Commission. "This survey, for the first time, proves what many of us in the criminal justice community have long known - many Idaho teens do not understand the dangers of meth and see great benefits in doing this dangerous drug."

Even though a majority of teens, young adults and parents believe there is a great risk in using the drug once or twice, the survey found a significant segment of young people, especially teens, is unaware of the dangers, supporting the need for a multimedia campaign to raise awareness, according to Idaho Meth Project officials.

Nearly one quarter, 22 percent, of teens believe the drug will make them happy, 25 percent believe it will help them lose weight, and 17 percent said it would give them increased energy, said the survey that was conducted among representative groups across the state.

Half of young adults and one in three teens have never discussed meth with their parents, although behavioral research has found that parent-child communication is one of the best prevention methods for reducing risky behavior, officials said.

"All evidence suggests that education and communication are critical in preventing meth use," said Megan Ronk, executive director of the Idaho Meth Project, which has begun running ads portraying the devastating effects of using the drug.

Regarding meth use, if the average junior and high school class is 25, one student in each class statewide is using meth. One in seven young adults, 14 percent, admitted to having tried meth.

Most chilling, of those that used meth, 19 percent said they first used when they were age 12 or younger, and 10 percent were under 10 years old.

"The goal of the Idaho Meth Project advertising is to 'unsell' meth, arming youth with the facts about methamphetamine so they can make better informed consumption decisions," Ronk said. "To that end, we have launched a sustained campaign of public service messaging to achieve significant, positive and measurable results to reduce the frequency and prevalence of methamphetamine use among youth in our state."

The 2007 survey will serve as a benchmark to measure the progress of the prevention campaign as it proceeds.

Recent statistics from the Idaho Department of Correction confirm the need for meth prevention and public awareness, especially among women, officials said. Of the nearly 2,000 female offenders in Idaho with a substance abuse problem, more than 80 percent said meth is their drug of choice. The state of Idaho also spends \$66 million annually to house adult male inmates who have a meth problem.

The costs to state and local governments are even greater when factoring in crime costs, treatment and recovery support services, uncompensated health and dental costs, and the impact on the foster care system.

"Methamphetamine has had a real serious impact on our foster care system," said Tom Shanahan, spokesman for the Idaho Health and Welfare Department. The number of children in foster care has nearly doubled in seven years, mostly due to meth use by their parents.

"With meth, basically children do stay in our care longer," he said. "Treatment programs for meth are longer, and often they're not as successful as they are for other substances. Often parents can't overcome addiction. So after a year, the department has to start looking for adoptive homes."