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Youth see meth 'benefits'

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TREASURE VALLEY — Experts say drug pushers are trying to make methamphetamine more appealing to young people by hyping its “quick-fix” qualities: an irresistible energy buzz and rapid weight loss.

And according to data released Tuesday by the Idaho Meth Project, an alarming number of Idaho teens are falling for the sales job hook, line and sinker.

The agency’s first-ever statewide survey reveals that a high number of young people perceive significant benefits in using meth and little risk from it.

Nearly one quarter of teens believe the drug will make them happy and help them lose weight, and 20 percent see little to no risk in trying meth — a drug which goes by many names among users, such as dope, speed, crystal, ice and crank.

“The selling point is that it’ll help you increase your energy level and get you through that finals week or help you stay up late studying. With young girls concerned with body image, the selling point is weight loss and overall energy level. That’s true to a certain extent,” said Idaho Meth Project executive director Megan Ronk.

“Of course what they don’t tell you is the high is never as high as you achieve that first time. That’s what we have to make sure young people understand. This is not a glamorous drug. If it doesn’t cost you your life, it’s going to cost you the things that are most important to you: your relationship with your family and friends, your job, your home.”

Underestimating drug’s risks

The survey comes on the heels of an aggressive ad campaign launched two weeks ago portraying the ravages of meth use.

The data released Tuesday validates the importance of that initiative, Ronk said. The survey, conducted among representative groups across the state, found that 45 percent of young adults report meth is readily available and 30 percent report having been offered the drug.

Four in 10 young people have not tried to dissuade friends from taking meth, and nearly one in four believe their friends would not give them a hard time for using the drug, suggesting a pronounced level of social approval.

"Our youth are at grave risk," Brent Reinke, director of the Idaho Department of Correction and chairman of the Idaho Criminal Justice Commission, said.

"This survey, for the first time, proves what many of us in the criminal justice community have long known," Reinke said. "Many Idaho teens do not understand the dangers of meth and see great benefits in doing this dangerous drug."

Family communication key

There's a high likelihood that first-time experimenters will transform into habitual users, Ronk said.

"That's what people in recovery say, that they can't believe how quickly it escalates. If they use it one time, there is a 95 percent chance that they will try it again," she said. "I can't tell you how many stories we've received since the campaign launched two weeks ago of: 'I abandoned my children after using a couple of months. I stole from my family and I lost everything.'"

Survey results showed that 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.

"All evidence suggests that education and communication are critical in preventing meth use," Ronk said. "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."

Meth use costs millions

Recent data from the Idaho Department of Correction confirms the need for meth prevention and public awareness activities in Idaho — especially as it relates to females.

Of the nearly 2,000 female offenders in Idaho with a substance abuse problem who are either incarcerated or on probation or parole, more than 80 percent indicate that meth is their drug of choice.

The state of Idaho spends \$66 million annually to house adult male inmates who admit having 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 impact on the foster care system.

On average, typical graduates of Ada County Drug Court — the overwhelming majority of them addicted to methamphetamine — had been using more than \$3,600 in drugs per person per month.

"Since only 41 percent were employed, they were not buying drugs with their paychecks," Chief Justice Daniel Eismann said in his State of the Judiciary address on Jan. 7.

Ronk added that the meth problem leads to all kinds of crime: "Clearly the overwhelming desire to continue to use the drug causes people to seek out a variety of measures to be able to obtain the money they need to be able to buy it."
