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Tribes taking varying paths in war on meth Indians viewing issue as 'critical'

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American Indian tribes and tribal groups are getting creative in fighting what they consider an epidemic on tribal lands - methamphetamine use.

In Oklahoma, Indian archery and the traditional game of Cherokee marbles have taken on new meaning in the past couple of years as vehicles for teaching students about the dangers of meth and other drugs.

Some tribes, such as the Lummi Nation of Washington, are fighting meth with one of the harshest punishments at their disposal: banishment. Still others are integrating traditional ideas and healing into alternative sentencing options through new drug courts.

And the Morongo Band of Mission Indians in California is among dozens of tribes who have sent employees to meth training programs to help them spot the signs of addiction.

"Several years ago, this wasn't Indian country's biggest substance abuse issue," said Jackie Johnson, executive director of the National Congress of American Indians. "Now, meth is clearly one of those critical crisis areas."

The group - which considers fighting meth a top priority - is working with the Partnership for a Drug Free America on designing a national ad campaign to warn American Indians about meth addiction. It also plans to address the problem at its annual convention in Sacramento in October.

The organization, which represents at least 250 tribes across the country, launched a major effort earlier this year to draw attention to what it says is an alarming rate of meth abuse on tribal lands.

Since then, the White House has created an interagency working group to address meth in Indian country, the Senate has held a hearing on the issue and tribes are creating a national task force to combat the problem.

Worries in Riverside County

In Riverside County, most of the tribal officials reached for comment either reported they did not have a major problem with meth or did not want to discuss the issue publicly. But local health officials say meth abuse is a problem countywide.

"It is the No. 1 drug of choice in Riverside County right now and has been for a number of years," said Maria Lozano, a behavioral health specialist at the county's mental health department.

Even though only 1.4 percent of the county's population is American Indian, they comprised about 2.2 percent of the

METH IMPACTS

According to a recent Bureau of Indian Affairs survey of 96 law enforcement agencies in Indian country:

- 74 percent said meth was biggest drug threat they faced.
- 60 percent said meth arrests had gone up in past year.
- 43 percent said powdered meth is highly available on their reservations.
- 46 percent said crystal meth is highly available.
- 64 percent said meth was responsible for an increase in domestic violence.
- 64 percent said assault and battery had increased because of meth.
- 57 percent said burglaries were up because of meth.
- 48 percent said child abuse and neglect cases were up because of meth.
- 90 percent said they want drug investigation training.
- 75 percent said they were paying more overtime to their officers to deal with meth.
- 16 percent said there were high rates of meth production on their reservations.
- 69 percent said their tribes don't sponsor meth rehabilitation programs.
- 34 percent said they have some prevention programs to address meth.
- 19 percent said they are planning to launch meth programs.
- 30 percent said they had a tribal drug court.
- 56 percent said they have no program.
- 14 percent said they were planning to create a drug court.
- 49 percent said they were participating in an interagency task force on meth.

nearly 5,000 admission cases for meth addiction last year at publicly funded facilities in Riverside, according to statistics kept by the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs.

Statewide, about 4.4 percent of the nearly 79,000 admissions were American Indian, while only 1.2 percent of the state's population are tribal members.

Local police officials say the number of meth-related calls received by the Riverside County Sheriff's office is rising even as the number of labs declines because meth is imported from Mexico.

Meth is a problem across the region, including on Indian lands, said Fred Fierro, the task force commander for the Coachella Valley Narcotics Task Force.

While the local tribes are generally supportive of law enforcement efforts, some Mexican drug pushers have been known to live on the reservations and traffic the drug from there, he said.

Waltona Manion, a spokeswoman for the Morongos, said she did not know how prevalent meth use among tribal members is, but the tribe sent its counseling staff to a recent meth training session to help them spot the signs of meth addiction and learn to work with meth users.

"It is a part of their proactive approach to their social service," she said.

The National American Indian Housing Council also has provided meth training to Morongo housing authority officials.

"The most tell-tale signs are rapid weight loss and extreme paranoia," said Jay Barton, a retired police official who helps train the organization.

Nancy Conrad, a spokeswoman for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, said she did not have any information about whether meth was a problem for tribal members.

But Mary Belardo, the former chairwoman of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla tribe, said several tribal members on her reservation can't seem to kick the meth habit.

"The whole valley has a problem," said Belardo, who now works at the tribal clinic. "It's a strange drug and it seems to be very powerful. People who get hooked on it, get really hooked."

Jacob Coin, a spokesman for the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians based in San Bernardino, said he did not think the tribe had a problem with meth.

However, Coin said the tribe has worked hard to combat the root of many social problems by creating jobs.

"When people have no economic opportunities and little other opportunities, these people tend to be swept away by these social ills," he said.

Rich, poor afflicted

But wealthier tribes, such as the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma, also feel the effects of meth.

Earlier this year, law enforcement officials announced one of the biggest meth busts in the region, netting 93 arrests and breaking up a trafficking ring that distributed drugs at three casinos in Oklahoma.

Some tribal officials hope returning to tradition also will help them combat the meth problem.

B.J. Boyd, with the Cherokee Nation's behavioral health services, said traditional activities can reach youth in a way a speaker in a classroom can't.

Substance abuse changes

In the past few years, meth has replaced alcohol as the No. 1 substance abuse problem in Indian country, tribal leaders

say. The consequences have been even more devastating.

American Indians are more likely than other racial groups to use meth, according to a 2004 survey by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. At the time, 1.7 percent of American Indians had used meth - compared to .7 percent of whites, .5 percent of Latinos and .1 percent of blacks.

Indian activists say those numbers have grown. Some tribes report much higher abuse rates.

It's the biggest problem facing tribal police now, said Chris Chaney, Bureau of Indian Affairs' director of law enforcement.

Chaney said tribes are being hit hardest because of sheer geography. Until recently, meth was primarily a problem in the West, home to most Indian tribes.

"One of the reasons is the vast majority of Indian country is west of the Mississippi [River]," he said.

In California, meth has created disturbing problems, say officials with the California Indian Legal Services. In nearly every case they have worked on in which Indian children are taken from their home, at least one parent is using meth or the baby tested positive for the drug at birth.

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