

The Sunday Oregonian

EDITORIAL

Sunday, September 20, 2009

Fighting meth drives down crime rate

There are plenty of reasons for Oregon's improvement, but one stands out

You don't have to dig very deep to discover the big secret behind the steep drop in property crimes in Oregon, reported in the FBI's annual release of crime statistics last week.

The FBI reports of local crime records showed that violent crime here decreased by 10.6 percent and property crimes declined by 6.9 percent in 2008 compared with 2007.

There is all kind of speculation about the cause of these declines, and much of it probably has some basis in reality. But these excellent numbers are most likely chiefly the result of Oregon's unique-in-the-nation law that requires prescriptions in order to obtain drugs that contain pseudoephedrine, the main ingredient in illegal methamphetamine.

Some states, notably Oklahoma, got the basic idea of separating these drugs from the consumer by placing them behind the sales counter. It was a start, but not enough, and Oklahoma is one of the states where meth is making a comeback. So far, nothing works better than Oregon's prescription-only approach. Pharmaceutical lobbyists have fought hard against the spread of such measures, which should be no surprise, and have even proposed the ridiculously complex idea of setting up databases that try to separate legit buyers from criminals.

Oregon's success in this area seems clearly to have carried over into the property crime statistics. The link between meth and theft, burglary and what used to be seen as vandalism has been clear for some time. In recent years that sort of thing rose to such a frenzy that not even highway guardrails were safe from the meth zombies, who would dismantle them then resell them to crooked businesses to get money to buy meth.

One of Oregon's leading meth crusaders, Lincoln County District Attorney Rob Bovett, chairman of the Oregon meth task force, says that other data also supports the belief that solving meth reaps great rewards in other areas of law enforcement as well. One of the hurdles the country must overcome, though, is the reluctance of states to really grapple with the biggest problem – the wide availability of easy-to-get drugstore remedies that contain pseudoephedrine. Surprisingly, considering its reputation, the only jurisdiction to do more than Oregon, Bovett points out, is Mexico.

"We asked (Mexico) for import quotas, and they phased them in," he said, "and then they became incredible partners. Mexico didn't just make (pseudoephedrine-based remedies) prescription-only, they banned them entirely."

Among the caveats is that meth use remains fairly high in Oregon and that there is a long way to go before it drops to levels that anyone could say is acceptable. This prospect remains distant, too, as long as states such as California fail to enact anti-meth laws that actually work, thus abetting the existence of meth superlabs that use nonprescription decongestants as their primary fuel.

There are, of course, many other trends, policies and enforcement actions that led to Oregon's encouraging crime statistics. These include things such as Measure 11 and related efforts to increase prison time for certain serious crimes, growing emphasis on early prevention, drug and alcohol rehab, and more discerning juvenile justice systems such as the one in Multnomah County that has become a national model. Often these efforts represent competing values and approaches to crime and justice but, even so, competing visions are probably better than none at all.

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OP ED

Sunday, September 20, 2009
By ROB BOVETT

Follow Oregon's lead on meth

Overall crime drops as the state shifts to drug policies based on science

As reported in Tuesday's Oregonian ("Violent crime drops 10.6% in Oregon"), the latest statistics released by the FBI indicate that local crime rates are going down both for violent crimes and property crimes. That's welcome news, especially during a recession, when many people would expect the opposite.

But there is even better news for Oregonians: Violent crime in Oregon took our nation's biggest drop, and a decrease in meth production may be the key. Of course, meth is not the only reason, but it does play an important role.

This good news is confirmed in other data recently released by the federal and state governments, including drug arrests and meth lab incidents. But not all drug arrests are down in Oregon. Just meth.

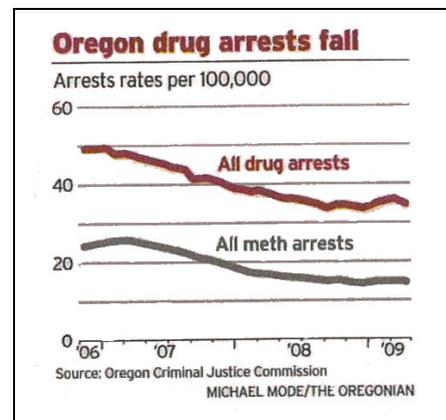
This is not to say we have defeated meth. Not even close. Even with our positive trends, meth remains by far the No. 1 illicit drug abuse problem in Oregon. But what makes Oregon different from the rest of the nation is that we are on the decline. Other states, including and especially California, are going in exactly the opposite direction. Meth labs are back with a vengeance, everywhere except Oregon.

So what makes us different? What did we finally get right? That is what many folks in Washington, D.C., and other states are asking, and why my phone and e-mail have been buzzing nonstop this past week.

What Oregon has done is pioneer a path away from traditional "war on drugs" policies based on fear and shifted instead to drug policies based on science.

Three things distinguish Oregon.

First, we utilized an extensive public information and community policing campaign. Not based on fear. Just the facts. As a result, Oregonians are more aware of the ugly truth about meth.





Brent Wojahn/The Oregonian, 2004

Cleanup of meth labs has become less common since Oregon became the first -- and still the only -- state to effectively control sales of pseudoephedrine, which is found in some cold and allergy medicines and is the key ingredient in the manufacture of meth.

More on meth

- A recently released federal report that examined trends in 10 U.S. counties found evidence of declining meth use among adult male offenders:

From the Executive Summary: "In Sacramento the proportion of arrestees involved in acquiring methamphetamine in the prior 30 days remains high (26%), unchanged from 2007, but in Portland reported acquisition is significantly lower (13%) than 2007 levels (23%)."

From the Conclusion: "Methamphetamine . . . declines significantly in one of the ADAM II western sites (Portland) from 2007 (20% positive) to 2008 (15% positive). Thirty five percent of Sacramento arrestees test positive in 2008, representing no statistically significant change from 2007."

The full report of the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) Program can be found at:

whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/pdf/adam2008.pdf

- Oregon drug arrest trends show the cause of an overall drop from November 2006 to March 2009 is entirely driven by meth. See a series of charts at: oregondec.org/CASB484/OR-DrugArrests.pdf

Sources: Office of National Drug Control Policy, Oregon Alliance for Drug Endangered Children

Second, we shifted resources to treatment strategies that actually work. The truth is that treatment works for meth addiction just as well as any other form of addiction, if we use the correct treatment and recovery support. Oregon's drug courts are a perfect example.

Finally, we were the first -- and remain -- the only state to effectively control pseudoephedrine, found in some cold and allergy medicines and the key ingredient necessary to make meth. Unlike most other drugs of addiction, meth supply and meth labs can be controlled, as extensively documented by The Oregonian in its "Unnecessary Epidemic" series published in 2004. With the leadership of a bipartisan caucus in Salem, we returned pseudoephedrine to its status as a prescription drug, as it was before 1976 and before the grand scale meth epidemic that ravaged Oregon from the late 1980s through 2007.

We also worked directly with our counterparts in Mexico, who followed Oregon's lead and then completely banned pseudoephedrine. Five other nations have recently done the same. This has put intense pressure on other states, where meth labs and meth arrests are rising.

Many other states are now pursuing legislation based on the Oregon model. U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., also has drafted legislation to make the successful Oregon model a national policy. But there is a tough road ahead.

Why? Money.

The pharmaceutical industry is making millions of dollars each year from diverted pseudoephedrine used to make meth. Blood money.

The payoff in our shifting to science-based drug policies can be measured in lives and families saved. After meeting this spring with our nation's new "drug czar," former Seattle police chief Gil Kerlikowske, I am optimistic that our nation may be following Oregon's lead.

Yes, we have made much progress. But we have a lot of work ahead. The five-year efforts of the Oregon Meth Task Force have just come to a close. We now have a new comprehensive statewide Alcohol and Drug Policy Commission, something we have needed for a long time. The new commission has a big challenge, but at least its starting point is a downward trend line, reduced crime, and effective policies based on science, rather than fear and money.

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Rob Bovett is the Lincoln County district attorney, chairman of the Oregon Meth Task Force and principal author of Oregon's meth lab control laws.

The Oregonian

Violent crime in Oregon takes nation's biggest drop; decrease in meth production may be key

by STUART TOMLINSON, The Oregonian
Monday, September 14, 2009

At least one factor in the precipitous decline in Oregon's crime rate - both violent and property crimes - appears to be based on the state's aggressive attack on methamphetamine production.

But a police spokesman in Hillsboro - the Oregon town with the steepest drop in both rates - says it would be naive to say it's the only factor.

Either way, the numbers look impressive: FBI statistics released Monday show that violent crime in Oregon dropped 10.6 percent in 2008, the largest decrease of any state in the nation, state justice officials said.

Mike Stafford, a public policy spokesman for the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, said the last time the violent crime rate was this low in Oregon was nearly 40 years ago in 1970.

In addition, the 6.9 percent drop in property crime was the eighth-largest decrease in the nation. Stafford said the last time the property crime rate was this low was 1966. Crime statistics are calculated on a per-capita basis.

"This moves Oregon down to the 40th highest violent crime rate and 23rd highest property crime rate," Stafford said. "Both of these are record lows for Oregon."

Officials link the dramatic decrease to the decline in methamphetamine use, arrests for meth, and the state's aggressive restrictions on the purchase of the precursor drug pseudoephedrine.

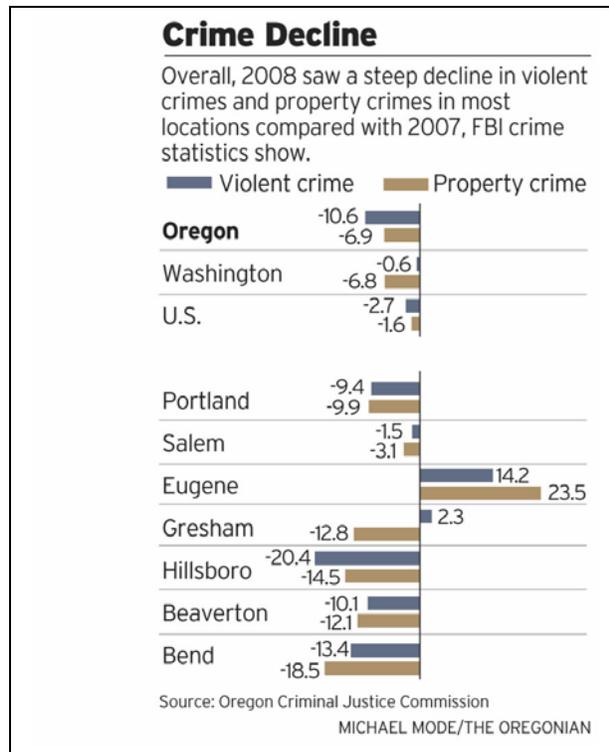
Craig Prins, a spokesman for the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, said the state's crime rate began dropping in 2005. Meth-related arrests in the state are down 40 percent in the state since then.

Read more

- In October 2004, The Oregonian published a series called the "Unnecessary Epidemic." It revealed the conditions that fueled the rapid growth of methamphetamine abuse across the West during the 1990s and the early 2000s. The series showed that one of the prime problems was the easy availability of precursor drugs used to make meth. In 2005, Oregon tightened controls on cold and allergy medicines containing pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient. The state required cold pills to be put behind pharmacy counters, and the Legislature passed a law requiring a prescription for many decongestants. To read the series, go to oregonlive.com/special

- To see the FBI statistics that fueled today's report on crime, go to blog.oregonlive.com/oregonian-extra/ and look for "Crime rates down in nation, Oregon."

"Crime rates are local and they can be complicated," Prins said. "But 2005 is when we seemed to get on top of the meth problem. Without having to deal with meth labs and meth crimes, police can focus on interdiction on the I-5 corridor. We have also seen an increase in drug courts and drug treatment."



However, Lt. Michael Rouches, spokesman for the Hillsboro Police Department, said the city's 20.4 percent decrease in violent crime and 14.5 percent decrease in property crimes could be more complicated than a simple drop in the meth problem.

"How did our demographics change?" he said, wondering whether it's more a case of fewer young people living in that community.

"We know that most crimes are committed by people in their late teens to mid-20s. When we sit down and look at the numbers we'll also have to ask what are the things we did to make crime go down."

Rouches did say, however, that much of the decrease in property crimes can be tied to a decrease in meth arrests. And spending less time dealing with meth-related crimes allows officers to spend more time on the streets.

"When we are visible, crime goes down," he said.

Violent crimes are murder and non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault, according to the FBI, which compiles the data from about 17,000 law enforcement agencies across the U.S. Property crimes are burglary, larceny-theft, motor vehicle theft and arson.

Eugene showed the sharpest increase in violent crime, jumping from 426 in 2007, to 496 in 2008, a 14.2 percent increase. Property crime also jumped in Eugene, a 23.5 percent change from 2007 to 2008.

In July, Lane County officials blamed the spike on cuts to law-enforcement budgets.

In 2007, there were 1.2 law-enforcement officers in Lane County for every 1,000 people, a number that ranks among the lowest in the state, according to a recent study by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission that measured public safety services in every county in Oregon.

By comparison, there are 2.0 officers for every 1,000 people in Multnomah County.

With a relatively low property tax compared with other Oregon counties and a drastic reduction in 2008 of federal payments from timber revenue, the county has had to cut staff from law

enforcement as well as cut jail beds. Neighboring Springfield showed no increase in violent crime from 2007 to 2008, but property crime leapt 21.1 percent.

Nationwide, murder and manslaughter dropped almost 4 percent last year, as reported crime overall fell around the country, according to FBI data.

The 3.9 percent decline in killings reported to police was part of a nationwide drop in violent crime of 1.9 percent from 2007 to 2008. Rapes declined 1.6 percent, to the lowest national number in 20 years, with about 89,000.

	UCR Violent Crime				UCR Property Crime			
	2007	2008	% Crime Change	% Crime Rate Change	2007	2008	% Crime Change	% Crime Rate Change
State	10777	9747	-9.6%	-10.6%	132143	124397	-5.9%	-6.9%
Portland	3701	3445	-6.9%	-9.4%	31586	29243	-7.4%	-9.9%
Salem	583	572	-1.9%	-1.5%	7436	7173	-3.5%	-3.1%
Eugene	426	496	16.4%	14.2%	7804	9821	25.8%	23.5%
Gresham	470	495	5.3%	2.3%	4332	3889	-10.2%	-12.8%
Hillsboro	195	162	-16.9%	-20.4%	2844	2536	-10.8%	-14.5%
Beaverton	220	200	-9.1%	-10.1%	2330	2072	-11.1%	-12.1%
Bend	155	139	-10.3%	-13.4%	2977	2513	-15.6%	-18.5%
Medford	265	282	6.4%	4.9%	3270	2882	-11.9%	-13.1%
Springfield	245	245	0.0%	-1.5%	3137	3858	23.0%	21.1%
Corvallis	57	60	5.3%	2.2%	1554	1341	-13.7%	-16.2%
10 City Total	17094	15843	-7.3%	-5.6%	199413	189725	-4.9%	-5.0%
Rest of State	4460	3651	-18.1%	-18.5%	64873	59069	-8.9%	-9.4%

--The Associated Press contributed to this report

The Oregonian

OP ED

Wednesday, June 16, 2010
By ROB BOVETT

Fighting methamphetamine: It's time that others followed Oregon's lead

Last week The New York Times ran a story about the federal government putting a hold on the release of a methamphetamine threat assessment prepared by the National Drug Intelligence Center.

According to the Times, the hold was due to concern that the report might upset international relations with Mexico prior to a visit to the White House by Mexican President Felipe Calderon. The report indicated that meth from Mexico is currently pure, cheap and plentiful, and that meth production in the U.S. would continue to decline as a result.

The next day The Oregonian ran an editorial about the report, and also raised the issue of how it's possible that Oregon has had such success in light of plenty of pure and cheap meth from Mexico.

There is a simple answer.

The NDIC report is wrong.

Most folks know about the "four C's" of diamonds -- cut, clarity, color and carat. For meth, it's the "four P's" -- purity, price, pounds and potency. Apparently the National Drug Intelligence Center didn't have access to adequate data and information about meth potency. As a result, its report contains incorrect analysis and conclusions.

Yes, meth coming from Mexico is pure, cheap and plentiful. But it's also weak. That's because Mexico has completely banned pseudoephedrine, the key ingredient necessary to make the powerful variety of meth that addicts seek.

Since the ban, drug-trafficking organizations haven't been able to smuggle enough pseudoephedrine into Mexico to meet demand. They've been forced to shift much of their production to a method that doesn't require pseudoephedrine but is more difficult and produces meth that's half as potent.

That's causing a surge of pseudoephedrine "smurfing" and meth manufacturing in the United States -- everywhere except Oregon. Smurfing is a term that refers to the lawful purchase of over-the-counter pseudoephedrine products that are later diverted to make meth. In the West, massive smurfing fuels "super labs" in central California. In the Midwest and South, it fuels thousands of small user labs.

The NDIC completely missed all of this. It relied on a federal meth lab incident database that is not up to date due to delayed reporting by many states.

Domestic meth production is not on the decline. It's increasing, at tragic levels. Smurfing is everywhere, except Oregon.

Many states and nations are now looking to the Oregon experience. In 2005, we pioneered a path away from drug policies based on fear and shifted to prevention, enforcement and treatment policies based on science. This included returning pseudoephedrine to a prescription drug, as it was prior to 1976. The payoff has been dramatic.

Last month, our nation's new drug czar, former Seattle Police Chief Gil Kerlikowske, released a new drug strategy that provides a more balanced approach, and one based on science and evidence. The strategy specifically describes Oregon's success when it comes to eliminating smurfing and dealing with the manufacture of meth.

It's been six years since the groundbreaking work of former reporter Steve Suo in The Oregonian's meth series, "Unnecessary Epidemic." Since that time, Oregon has played a pivotal role in providing real solutions and helping other states and nations. The results can be measured in lives and families saved.

Led by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, the Oregon congressional delegation is working to move our entire nation in the same direction.

It's time for the rest of Congress to pay attention.

Rob Bovett is Lincoln County district attorney.



Winning the War on Meth Labs

Oregon Law Makes Key Ingredient Available Only With Prescription

Saturday, March 20, 2010

By NEAL KARLINSKY and CARMEN PEREZ

The newest front lines in the war on meth have been drawn and this time they are your local pharmacy.

A meth user can't make methamphetamine without pseudoephedrine, the main ingredient in most over-the-counter cold medicines like Sudafed, so first Oregon and now Missouri and Mississippi have made those medicines available only with a prescription.

The success of those laws, particularly Oregon's, which has been on the books for five years, has lawmakers from California to Washington, D.C., considering ways to make it harder to get these drugs.

According to the United Nations, meth is the most abused hard drug on earth. Each year thousands of labs are busted across the nation; in 2008, 6,783 labs were discovered.

But in Oregon, monthly lab seizures have declined by 96 percent since requiring a prescription for medicines containing pseudoephedrine. In 2009, only 10 labs were discovered in Oregon, down from 192 in 2005 when the law was passed.

It was Rob Bovett of the Lincoln County District Attorney's office who pushed the state to pass the law requiring a doctor's prescription to purchase cold medicine.

Bovett is so consumed with beating the drug that he carries around the parts of a portable meth lab to show lawmakers how easy it is to make the drug when ingredients are available over the counter.

But Oregon was not always winning the war on meth. In 2001, at the height of the meth epidemic, the state was awash in meth labs. That year 1,480 were reported, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA).

Sgt. Erik Fisher of Oregon State Police said police were busting meth labs by the hundreds.

"We were tripping over meth labs," Fisher said. "It was everything we could do to stay ahead of processing those labs on a regular basis."

Nine years later, thanks in part to the crusading prosecutor, Oregon has almost completely eradicated all of its meth labs.

Meth-related arrests have also dropped by 40 percent from 956 arrests per month in 2007 to 541 per month in 2009.



Fight Over How to Win the War on Meth

Bovett said he fields calls from states that want to replicate Oregon's track record. Mississippi was the second state to pass a law similar to Oregon's. Missouri has also passed laws and states like California are strongly considering laws.

Bovett's success has also caused pharmaceutical companies to take notice. They have begun to wage their own war of sorts, challenging this law and others like it. Companies such as Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer and Merck say it is too hard for customers to buy cold medicine.

Pseudoephedrine is a very profitable business for companies, earning them more than \$500 million a year.

The Consumer Healthcare Products Association (CHPA) has launched a campaign to fight these laws. They are pushing for states to instead set up a computer tracking system to prevent abusers from making repeated purchases. They are even willing to pick up the tab for the tracking systems.

Oklahoma, Arkansas and Kentucky have launched these tracking systems with the financial backing of the industry, and Oklahoma has become the model state for using the system.

In the United States, meth use by teens has dropped by about 25 percent in the last three years, according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse.

Although the cold drug control laws and tracking systems have been successful at curbing the small labs that used to be responsible for much of the meth production in the United States, Mexican drug cartels have begun to pick up on this lucrative business.

Five main Mexican drug cartels have increased operations in the United States in recent years, according to the DEA.

According to Bovett, pharmaceutical companies are standing in the way of further success in the war on meth, but the CHPA and pharmaceutical companies say that their tracking systems are far more beneficial to the public.

The battle lines are drawn, and states continue to look to Oregon and Oklahoma as models for each of these systems.

<http://abcnews.go.com/WN/drug-makers-unhappy-oregons-anti-meth-lab-law/story?id=10159119>

Oregon's Simple Solution to the Meth Epidemic

By David A. Graham | NEWSWEEK

Published March 26, 2010

From the magazine issue dated April 5, 2010

Methamphetamine makers across the country have expanded operations in recent years as demand for the feel-good drug has risen with unemployment. In Oregon, however, the once booming industry has nearly disappeared. Between 2005 and 2009 the number of lab seizures - the best indicator of production - dropped an astounding 96 percent, from 192 to 10, according to a recent report by the Oregon Narcotics Enforcement Association. Even more astounding: to get these results the state simply restricted cold and allergy medicines with pseudoephedrine, making this key meth ingredient unavailable without a prescription.



Were the rest of the U.S. to follow Oregon's lead, says Emory University professor Jean O'Connor, who studies meth policy, police could focus almost wholly on Mexican smugglers - America's top meth suppliers. The number of users would continue to fall as well. Last year in Oregon, meth arrests were half of what they had been in 2006, the year the law took effect.

But don't expect the stuff to be cleared from every corner of the country any time soon. While Mississippi has adopted Oregon's approach, at least 10 meth-afflicted states are sticking to a less effective eradication program: a database that lets pharmacists track pseudoephedrine purchases. It's a popular fix for lawmakers, since drug companies — protective of their \$500 million cold-and-allergy-care business — set up the systems for free, and runny-nosed voters can't complain. But it's popular with dealers, too, who can dupe the system with an army of small-batch buyers. In Oklahoma, for example, the database has cut lab seizures by about 50 percent — a significant number, but still shy of Oregon's silver bullet.

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