



## Situation Report

Product No. 2009-S0787-005

# Methamphetamine Production in the United States Rebounds to Meet Domestic Demand

## Executive Summary

Domestic production of methamphetamine—in both small and large capacity laboratories—increased significantly in 2008, as evidenced by the first increase in domestic laboratory seizures since 2004. The surge in domestic methamphetamine production was triggered by a decrease in supplies of Mexican methamphetamine in many key U.S. drug markets in 2008—the result of import restrictions and a ban on pseudoephedrine products in Mexico. The increased production in the United States was made possible because of the rising prevalence of organized pseudoephedrine smurfing groups—the primary source of pseudoephedrine to domestic methamphetamine laboratories.

Most domestic methamphetamine laboratories are small-scale<sup>1</sup> and increasingly use a simplified form of the lithium ammonia production method known as “one-pot” or “shake and bake.” The method likely has grown in popularity because it is simple—completed in a nearly one-step process with all ingredients combined in a single reaction vessel, often a 2-liter soda bottle. Large-scale<sup>2</sup> methamphetamine production, while not as widespread, also increased significantly in 2008—such laboratories are controlled and operated by Mexican drug trafficking organizations in California.

The increase in domestic methamphetamine production will most likely continue through 2009.

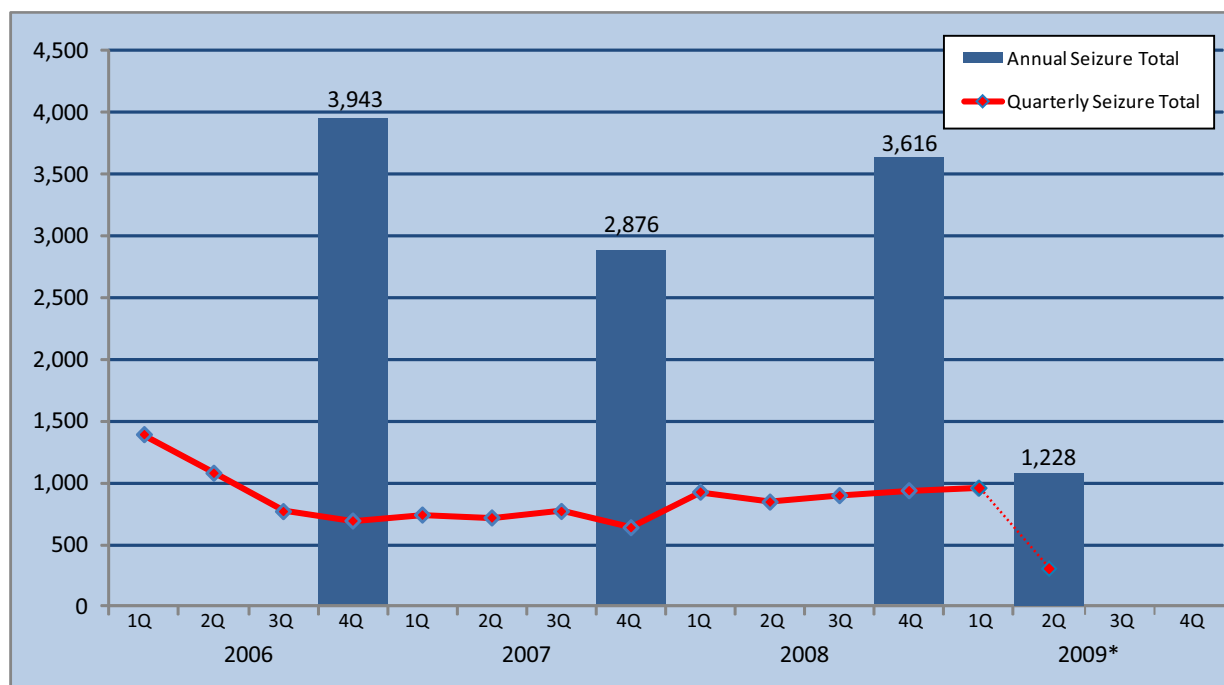
## Discussion

***Small-scale methamphetamine production in the United States—particularly at lithium ammonia laboratories—increased significantly in 2008 and early 2009.*** National Seizure System (NSS) data show that the number of seized methamphetamine laboratories increased 26 percent from 2007 (2,876 laboratories) to 2008 (3,616 laboratories)—the first increase in domestic methamphetamine laboratory seizures since 2004. Furthermore, methamphetamine laboratory seizures for the first quarter of 2009 are on pace with 2008 first-quarter seizures. It is very likely that 2009 laboratory seizures are, in fact, already exceeding the 2008 seizure rate (see Figure 1 on page 2).

The increase is due primarily to a rise in methamphetamine production in small-scale laboratories in which the producers use some form of the “lithium ammonia” production method. During the 2008 surge in small-scale methamphetamine production, many laboratory operators used the relatively new and increasingly popular “one-pot” form of the lithium ammonia method of methamphetamine production (see text box on page 2), sharply driving up the overall number of seized lithium ammonia methamphetamine laboratories. In fact, of the small-scale laboratories seized in 2007 and 2008, the number producing methamphetamine via the lithium ammonia method

1. Small-scale methamphetamine laboratories are generally capable of producing 1 pound or less of methamphetamine per production cycle.
2. Large-scale methamphetamine laboratories—often referred to as “superlabs”—are capable of producing 10 or more pounds of methamphetamine per production cycle.

**Figure 1. Reported Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures in the United States, by Quarter, 2006–2009\***



Source: National Seizure System, run date June 8, 2009.

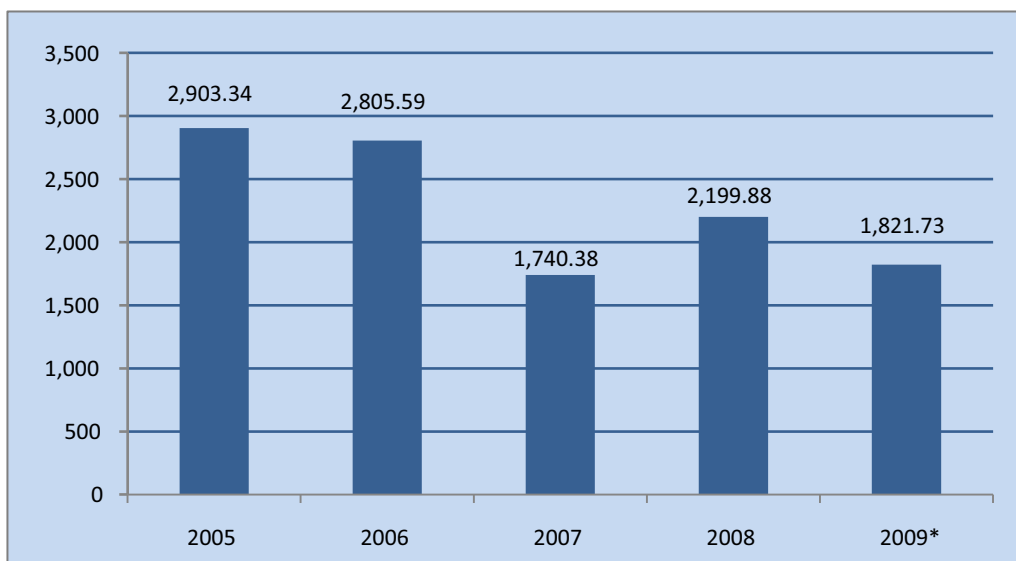
\*Preliminary data.

### “One-Pot” or “Shake and Bake” Methamphetamine Production

A one-pot cook is a variation of the lithium ammonia method of production—also commonly referred to as the “Nazi” method. Instead of producing methamphetamine through a series of sequential steps—normally used in the Nazi method—the one-pot method is concluded in a single reaction vessel (typically a 2-liter plastic soda bottle), and all ingredients are mixed together at the outset. The mixture is left to react, naturally producing the necessary ammonia, which then reacts with the lithium metal to convert the pseudoephedrine into methamphetamine. Like all clandestine methamphetamine production operations, the one-pot method is dangerous because the reactions are volatile and difficult to control.

increased 61 percent, from 1,486 in 2007 to 2,389 in 2008. NSS data for 2009 show that this trend has continued: 73 percent (882 of 1,208) of the small-scale laboratories seized during the first quarter of 2009 were lithium ammonia-method laboratories.

**Decreased Mexican methamphetamine production has driven the increase in domestic production in many parts of the country, particularly in the Southeast Region.** Pseudoephedrine and ephedrine import restrictions in Mexico resulted in decreased Mexican methamphetamine production in 2007, as evidenced by a reduced flow of the drug from Mexico into the United States.<sup>a</sup> NSS data show a 38 percent decrease in the amount of methamphetamine seized along the Southwest Border from 2006 (2,805.59 kg) to 2007 (1,740.38 kg). Similarly, the amount of methamphetamine seized along the Southwest Border in 2008 (2,199.88 kg) remained well below 2006 levels (see Figure 2 on page 3). As a result, the availability of Mexican methamphetamine in U.S. drug markets has decreased since 2007. Methamphetamine producers in the United States are responding to the decrease, attempting to sustain availability of the drug through a resurgence in

**Figure 2. Southwest Border Area Methamphetamine Seizures, in Kilograms, 2005–2009\***

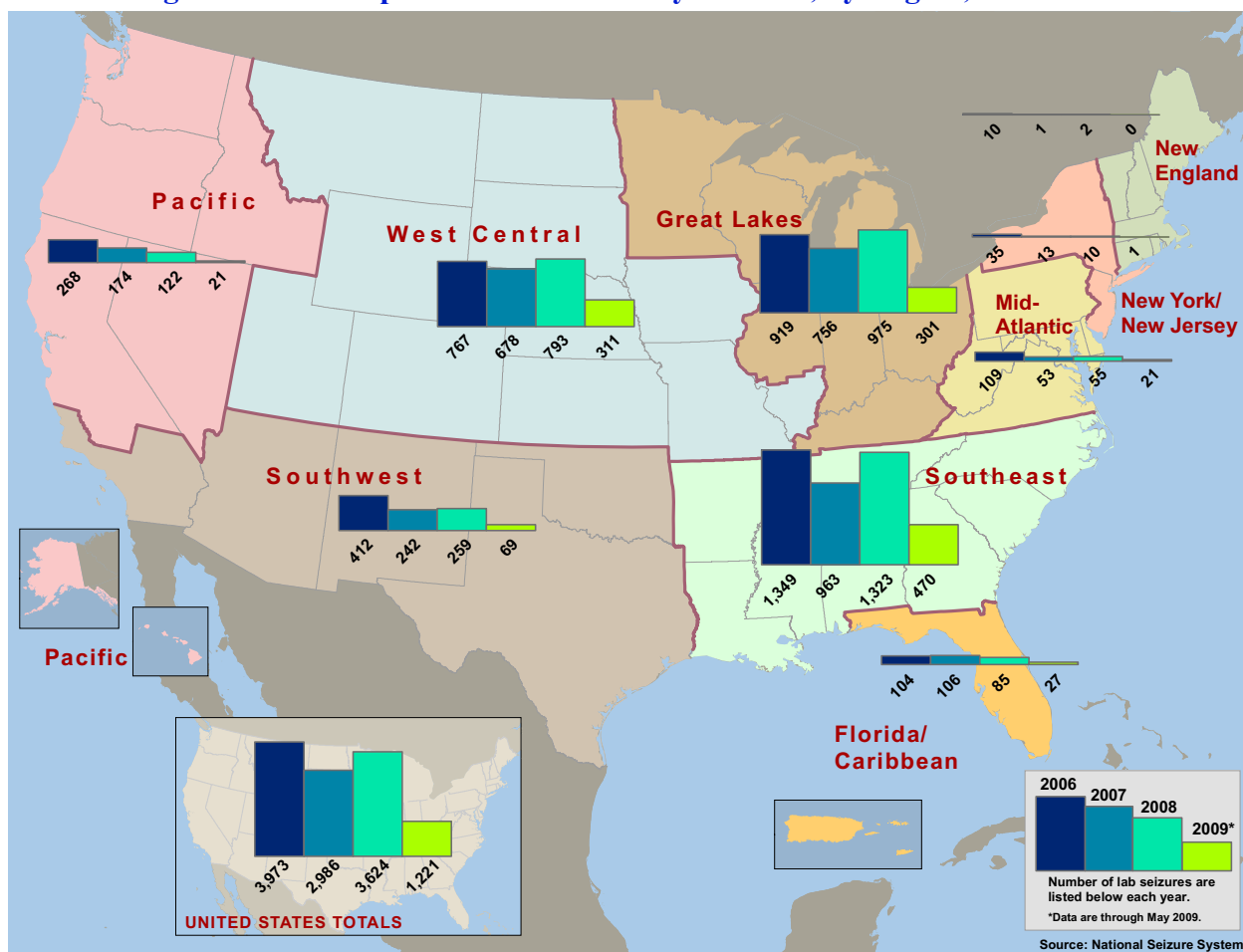
Source: National Seizure System, run date July 14, 2009.

\*Preliminary data.

small-scale production, particularly in the Great Lakes, Southeast, and West Central Regions. The most pronounced increase has occurred in the Southeast Region, where laboratory seizures increased 37 percent from 2007 (963 labs) to 2008 (1,323 labs). Seizure totals for the Southeast Region through May 2009 are on pace to meet or surpass 2008 totals (see Figure 3 on page 4).<sup>b</sup> Methamphetamine laboratory seizures in the region were highest in Tennessee in 2008; however, Alabama had the greatest increase in laboratory seizures (246 percent), from 90 in 2007 to 311 in 2008 (see Figure 4 on page 5). The increase in the Southeast Region is due primarily to a rise in one-pot methamphetamine production. Of the small-scale laboratories seized in the Southeast Region, the proportion of lithium ammonia laboratories increased from 357 of 874 in 2007 to 858 of 1,317 in 2008.

***Pseudoephedrine smurfing is fueling the increase in domestic methamphetamine production.*** Pseudoephedrine smurfing—making numerous small-quantity purchases of products that contain pseudoephedrine for use in laboratory operations (see text box on page 4)—by individuals and criminal groups has increased steadily since 2007 in the Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, Pacific, Southeast, Southwest, and West Central Regions.<sup>c</sup> The smurfs, whose operations are becoming increasingly organized, sell the precursor chemicals to methamphetamine producers or trade it for the drug. For example, many methamphetamine laboratory operators in the Central Valley California High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), including Mexican criminal groups operating superlabs, are producing methamphetamine with pseudoephedrine acquired primarily through smurfing operations based in central and southern California, particularly San Diego County.<sup>d</sup>

Figure 3. Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures, by Region, 2006–2009\*



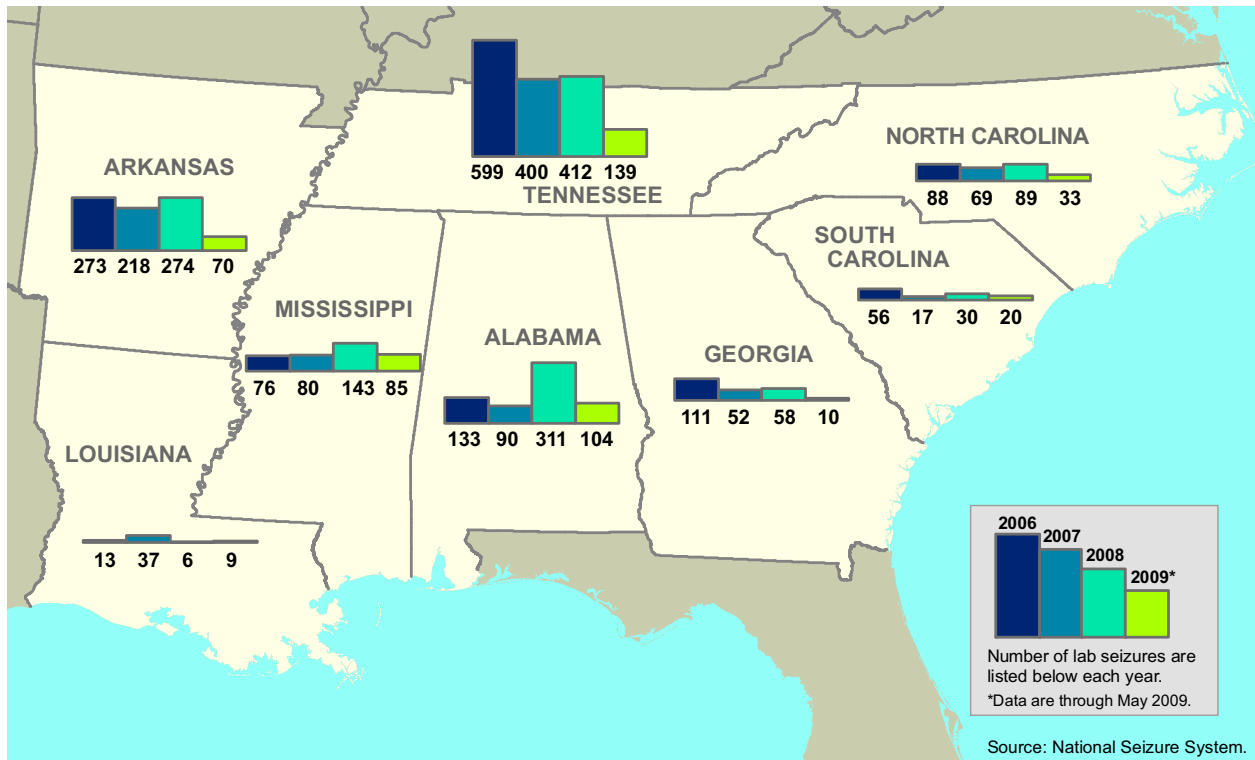
### Pseudoephedrine Smurfing

Pseudoephedrine smurfing is a method used by some methamphetamine traffickers to acquire large quantities of precursor chemicals. Methamphetamine producers purchase the chemicals in quantities at or below the legal thresholds from multiple retail locations. Methamphetamine producers often enlist the assistance of several friends or associates in smurfing operations to increase the speed of the operation and the quantity of chemicals acquired.

### Intelligence Gaps

*Methamphetamine production estimates—domestic and foreign—are unavailable.* The amount of methamphetamine produced in Mexico, Canada, and the United States is unknown; therefore, it is not possible to accurately determine the amount of methamphetamine available in U.S. drug markets or the relative market share for methamphetamine from various source areas. As a result, it is difficult to precisely measure the relative influence of foreign versus domestic methamphetamine production trends on U.S. drug markets. Any conclusions or predictions regarding methamphetamine production and availability are based entirely on analysis of production and availability indicators such as methamphetamine laboratory seizure data.

**Figure 4. Methamphetamine Laboratory Seizures in the Southeast Region, by State, 2006–2009\***



**Outlook**

*Domestic methamphetamine production will most likely increase through 2009.* Pseudoephedrine smurfing is becoming more widespread and is well organized in most regions of the country. This flow of pseudoephedrine to laboratory operators will most likely result in increased domestic methamphetamine production, particularly in small-scale laboratories but also in large-scale laboratories often operated by Mexican DTOs, especially if producers in Mexico are unable to significantly increase methamphetamine production to 2006 levels.

## **End Notes**

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- a. NDIC *National Methamphetamine Threat Assessment 2009*, December 2008, Product No. 2008-Q0317-006.
- b. NDIC *National Methamphetamine Threat Assessment 2009*, December 2008, Product No. 2008-Q0317-006.
- c. NDIC *National Methamphetamine Threat Assessment 2009*, December 2008, Product No. 2008-Q0317-006.
- d. Robert Pennal, Western States Information Network, Interview May 18, 2009.

## Sources

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### Federal

Executive Office of the President

Office of National Drug Control Policy

High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas

California Border Alliance Group

Central Valley California

Fresno Methamphetamine Task Force

Stanislaus, San Joaquin Methamphetamine Task Force

Los Angeles

Los Angeles County Regional Criminal Information Clearinghouse

Northern California

U.S. Department of Justice

Bureau of Justice Assistance

Western States Information Network

Drug Enforcement Administration

El Paso Intelligence Center

National Seizure System

### State and Local

#### California

Alameda County Drug Task Force

Bay Methamphetamine Task Force

Los Angeles Police Department

Merced Sheriff's Department

Sacramento Police Department

San Diego Law Enforcement Coordination Center

### International

United Nations

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**Questions and comments may be directed to  
National Drug Threat Assessment Unit, National Threat Analysis Branch.**



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