

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.

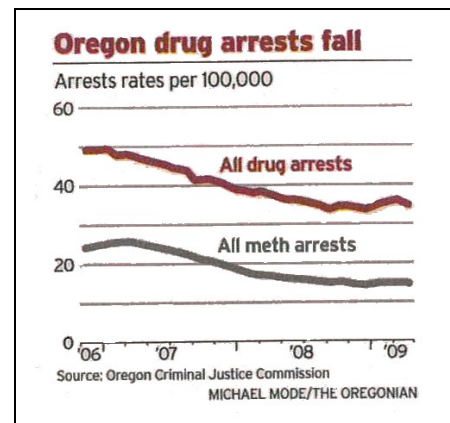
This is not to say we have defeated meth. Not even close. Even with our positive trends, meth remains by far the No. 1 illicit drug abuse problem in Oregon. But what makes Oregon different from the rest of the nation is that we are on the decline. Other states, including and especially California, are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



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.

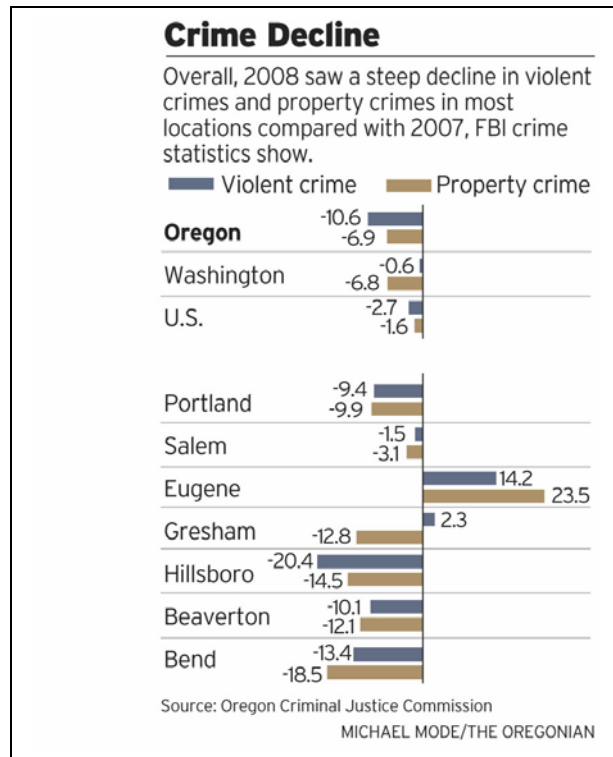
Craig Prins, a spokesman for the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, said the state's crime rate began dropping in 2005. Meth-related arrests in the state are down 40 percent in the state since then.

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