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## **Meth study: Drug use rampant, devastating to Santa Cruz County**

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**By Jennifer Squires**

SANTA CRUZ — Methamphetamine use in the county is soaring and experts say it's going to get worse, according to a study released Thursday.

"We haven't seen it peak yet," said Bill Manov, administrator of the county Alcohol and Drug Program.

A study analyzing meth use across the county showed its addiction also is linked to a significant amount of domestic violence, child abuse, mental illness and nondrug crimes, such as identity theft and burglary in the county.

"I don't know what happened, but somewhere along the line, meth just sucked this county up," recovering addict Robert Rojas said. "It doesn't matter who you are — it grabs you"

The study aimed to determine what the impact of meth use was for multiple county agencies, including law enforcement, child welfare services, treatment programs, the juvenile justice system and health services.

Those who use the drug are mostly white, 25 or older and live in North County, according to the study, which drew conclusions from the "snapshot month" of February.

"I think anecdotally we kind of knew this," Manov said.

But many involved in the study were shocked at the effect meth has on youth, including the children of addicts and teenage users.

More than half of the kids in the Youth Services treatment program used meth and nearly 50 percent of the 362 children with open cases through Family and Children's Services at the county Human Resources Agency had a parent with suspected or confirmed methamphetamine use, and almost 60 percent of those children were younger than 5.

"That was very surprising," said Cecilia Espinola, Human Resources Agency director. "We didn't expect it to be that high.

"Meth destroys families"

National data on methamphetamine suggests the drug's prevalence has hit a high and is leveling out or even dropping. However, meth became popular later in Santa Cruz County than in the rest of the country and, as a result, use of the drug continues to rise.

"It's a problem that's in some ways, below the surface," Manov said.

For example, almost one-third of those in the Domestic Violence Batterers Program said they previously used methamphetamine. Using the drug also comes with residual effects, including brain damage in some cases.

"This is a particularly devastating drug," Rama Khalsa, county Health Services Agency director, said. "The supply is prevalent, and it's relatively cheap"

Information from the study, the first done in the county, will be used in community education events this fall and to apply for state and federal grants doled out to treatment programs and prevention efforts.

"It's something everybody in the community needs to be concerned about," Sheriff Steve Robbins said.

### **Meth at a glance**

- 29 percent of County Jail inmates who received crisis intervention services had confirmed methamphetamine use.
- 75 people were involved in methamphetamine-related crimes in the county during February.
- Of 400 existing juvenile crime cases reviewed, 16 percent were involved in methamphetamine.
- 19 percent of the 151 clients evaluated for hospitalization at the Dominican Hospital Behavioral Health Unit were confirmed, reported or suspected of using meth.
- Of the 1,461 people treated by the county Health Services Agency Alcohol and Drug Program during February, 25 percent listed meth as their drug of choice.

SOURCE: Santa Cruz County Methamphetamine Snapshot Study