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# Meth-related identity thefts up in San Diego

By Andrew Peterson  
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Consider a drug that appeals to users because it convinces them that it improves their lives immensely and makes them better people. Consider too that it appeals to those who sell it because it is easily made with store-bought ingredients, and is highly profitable.

That drug is methamphetamine or meth - and for people like Toni McKean, the coordinator of the East County arm of the Methamphetamine Strike Force since 2002, these are not idle considerations.

Meth has been said to bring personal, familial and societal ruin - paranoia and violent behavioral outbursts are common among long-term users - along with its pleasures. The East County Strike Force has been meeting monthly for two years in

unconcerned about the risk they pose to themselves and those around them.

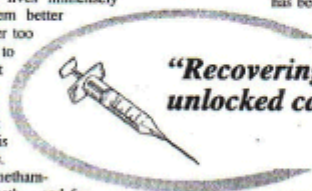
"The danger of labs blowing up is strong," McKean said. "We have had houses with fires in East County."

Social service agencies fight on another front. The children of meth lab

& Human Services, called Drug-Endangered Children."

Meth use is not confined to any particular social class.

"That's a surprise to a lot of people," McKean said. "It isn't just lower-income areas, but upper-income areas



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- Toni McKean

East County branch coordinator, Methamphetamine Strike Force

their ongoing effort to combat meth use. There are many battlefronts.

One of them is the private meth labs, whose operators work at a chemically-fueled, frenzied pace, and are lethally

operators are put at risk, physically and emotionally, by their parents.

"There have been meth labs where children have been found and rescued," McKean said. "That's a program through the East County Health

too. There's been a case recently in Escondido where one of the planning commissioners was arrested for making meth in storage lockers."

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According to McKean, the situation in East County was once sufficiently severe to earn it the title of "Meth capital of the world." She has worked hard to change that.

"We've made a dent with the Meth Strike Force," she said.

But the success in East County has led to new problems in other geographic areas, McKean conceded.

"It's moving eastward ... and has hit the middle America and the South very, very heavily. They haven't had the experience as far back as we have, so they're a little bit farther back on the scale of getting a handle on it," she said.

Geographical shifts have been accompanied by methodological ones. Addicts and distributors have turned to identity theft to pay for meth. The District Attorney's office said that crimes involving ID theft and meth were up 30 percent last year.

Thieves look for credit cards, checks and any documents with social security numbers on them.

"Recovering addicts told us about grabbing purses out of unlocked cars where people are filling up at the gas station," McKean said. "And of course mailboxes ... People who steal these documents don't always take all of your mail. They just take the good stuff, so you don't even know your mail has been stolen."

Document thieves, meth sellers and meth users have improvised multi-layered networks.

"Usually the people stealing the documents aren't the ones that use them," McKean said. "They trade them for drugs themselves, and the higher level drug dealers pass out these documents to other people lower on the ladder, who then perpetrate the identity theft."

California law restricts access to the precursor chemicals needed for meth's manufacture. These include such familiar commercial products as Sudafed, which drug stores have put behind the pharmacy counter.

Customers must purchase them directly from a pharmacist, and are limited to three packages at a time. Admittedly this has only marginally hindered meth sellers, McKean said.

"They go from store to store to store, buying three packets each and having associates buy the packages."

If McKean is daunted by the scope of the challenge posed by the meth problem, she doesn't show it. She expressed great admiration for the people in the Strike Force and the work they do.

"It's been a revelation to me," she said. "How well our treatment programs are led - how very well organized, how very effective, with lots of people from the recovery community. I hadn't realized that before I got involved in this work."