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Source: *Anthropology Now*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (April 2013), pp. 27-35

Published by: [Paradigm Publishers](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5816/anthropologynow.5.1.0027>

Accessed: 20/06/2014 15:05

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Methamphetamine in Rural America

Notes on Its Emergence

William Garriott

In the fall of 2004, Officer Justin Taylor with the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources received an anonymous tip that someone had killed deer out of season and was processing the hides near a cluster of trailers in a remote part of the county. (All names in this article are pseudonyms, including Baker County.) Calls like this were typical. But when Taylor went to investigate, he found something unexpected. From the road he could see white smoke rising from the door of a building near the trailers. A small group of men were moving in and out of the building. Each time they exited, they rubbed their irritated eyes. It was obvious that, whatever the men were up to, it had nothing to do with deer.

Taylor radioed Deputy Casey Phillips from the Baker County Sheriff's Department. Together they approached the building. White smoke was still pouring out and appeared to be coming from a two-liter soda bottle near the door. The ground was littered with debris: paper towels, coffee filters, plastic tubing and several glass jars, one of which was filled with damaged AA batteries. A strong chemical odor hung in the air. Through the open door the two officers saw a large yellow bucket. Inside the bucket a

white substance was bubbling. The officers suspected—and tests would later confirm—that the substance was methamphetamine.

Illegal drugs were once thought to be a problem unique to urban communities. But methamphetamine—a potent synthetic stimulant—has fundamentally challenged this idea. Not only are so-called “meth labs” more likely to be found in rural areas, but methamphetamine use is as well. Methamphetamine has thus come to signify for many observers both the failure of US efforts to control the drug problem and the death of rural America's image as a haven from the ills of modern life. “As we begin the 21st Century in America,” a report by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University lamented, “there is *no place to hide* from the problems of substance abuse and addiction” (CASA 2000, ii; italics in original).

Between 2006 and 2007 I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in Baker County, West Virginia, a rural Appalachian community of approximately 12,000. Methamphetamine was an emerging concern at the time, and I wanted to understand the unique symbiosis that seemed to have developed between rural communities across the United States and methamphetamine. Over the course of my fieldwork I discovered that methamphetamine's popularity in rural communities could be traced to two of the drug's defining features: its ability to be produced locally using common household items and its utility as a means of performance enhancement in the context of manual labor. Both aspects shaped meth's impact on life in Baker County.

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ments to speak with Justin Stokes. Justin had been convicted several years earlier of multiple counts of possession of methamphetamine with the intent to deliver. After spending two years incarcerated, he had been released on probation. Although he was convicted only for selling meth, Justin claimed to have produced it as well. "I'd just go up here to the hardware store, get my stuff, come back to the house and cook it," he said. He went on to list the various ingredients he used: "Boric acid, witch hazel, Nasonex, Sudafed; I've seen it made with ether, sulfur. ..."

The ability of individuals like Justin to make methamphetamine from common household items has become one of the drug's defining features. Here is how Donnie Grate, one of the men arrested for producing methamphetamine in the lab noted above, described the process:

You take the Sudafed, pop them out of the pack, crush them and grind them, put them in a bucket. Take your batteries, peel them off and get the lithium strip out of them. Put the pills and the lithium in a

bucket and pour the anhydrous on it. Then you throw Coleman [camp stove fuel] to it, it will bubble ... a white stream of liquid. Then you take the lid off, put it in a jar. Then you take a pop bottle with tubing, three inch tubing, and then you put salt liquefier in it and smoke it. Put it in a jar and smoke that liquid. Then you filter that into another jar and get the meth out.

All of the ingredients used in the manufacture of methamphetamine are legal substances. Though they are regulated—increasingly so, as a result of anti-meth legislation targeting home production—the items are still relatively easy to obtain. In the United States, commonly used chemicals include ephedrine/pseudoephedrine (extracted from cold medications and diet pills), anhydrous ammonia (a chemical fertilizer used in modern, industrial agriculture), lithium (extracted from batteries), sodium hydroxide (lye) and toluene (available as paint thinner). Recipes are equally easy to obtain. An online search of the term "methamphetamine recipe" yields over 3.3 million hits. These recipes were once carefully guarded secrets. But with the advent of the Internet, instructions for producing meth could be accessed by anyone, anywhere. This helped meth to spread beyond the west coast where it had previously been concentrated.

Given the availability of both meth recipes and ingredients, it is not surprising that meth labs have been found everywhere, from hotel rooms to suitcases. During the 1990s there was a six-fold increase in the number of meth labs seized by the DEA. The majority of these were located in less-popu-

lated areas. This trend continued through the early 2000s before the passage of legislation targeting domestic production. Furthermore, in the 1990s, areas of largely rural states such as Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, Kentucky, Tennessee and West Virginia were designated by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) as High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA)—a designation that had previously been reserved for urban areas such as New York City and Los Angeles (CASA 2000, iii).

There are several reasons why methamphetamine cooks have tended to locate in rural areas. One is that rural areas make it easier for them to avoid detection. Methamphetamine manufacturing produces a strong chemical odor that would draw immediate complaint and suspicion from neighbors in more populated locations. In rural areas, meth producers may locate far enough away from others to avoid detection. The portable nature of meth labs also means that producers can, for instance, travel to a remote wooded location, make a batch of methamphetamine in a matter of hours, and be gone before anyone notices their presence. Many of the meth cooks in Baker County were locals, but there were also those who were more itinerant. They would set up temporary operations where they would cook several batches of meth, distribute them through local networks of users and dealers, and then leave before they could be detected. Donnie Grate and his family, for instance, became briefly connected with cooks from Indiana who fled the area after Donnie was arrested. Similarly, one of the largest meth lab discoveries in Baker County happened accidentally

when a sheriff's deputy responded to a domestic disturbance call and discovered a cook who had been manufacturing methamphetamine for years throughout West Virginia.

But avoiding detection is but one concern. There are also the challenges associated with meth production itself. Methamphetamine manufacture is a dirty process which produces significant chemical and physical waste, both of which must be disposed of once cooking is complete. In rural areas, waste materials may simply be dumped in the woods, on the side of the road, or, in the case of chemical byproducts, poured down drains, on the ground or into streams. Matt Keezle, an officer with the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, described discovering the remnants of former meth labs throughout the state lands he patrolled. In these piles he would find old batteries with their lithium strips removed; used plastic tubing; coffee filters (often containing chemical by-products or

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residue); empty packages of cold medicine; two-liter soda bottles (in which meth had been mixed); used Coleman fuel and other chemical containers; and miscellaneous debris such as rubber gloves, paper towels, and so on. What was no longer visible at these sites—but certainly present—was the chemical waste. Between five and six pounds of chemical waste is produced for every pound of methamphetamine.

Rural areas are also more attractive as meth-production sites because the key chemicals used in the cooking process are often easier to obtain there. Anhydrous ammonia, for instance, is a common fertilizer used in modern industrial agriculture. Not only is it available for purchase in local farm supply stores, but it can be stolen from the farms themselves. This was precisely how Donnie Grate and his family operated. They would steal the anhydrous ammonia they needed from a tank on a large dairy farm in a neighboring county. Farmers have also been known to sell anhydrous ammonia to meth cooks or even trade it for methamphetamine.

State and federal legislation has worked to make such precursor chemicals more difficult to obtain. Over-the-counter medications containing pseudoephedrine, for instance, must now be kept behind the pharmacy counter, and customers are limited in the amount they can purchase each month. Cooks have found ways around such regulations, however. To obtain pseudoephedrine, for instance, cooks have developed a technique known as “Smurfing” in which they employ a small group of individuals to purchase their legal limit of pseu-

doephedrine-containing medications each month. In exchange, the cook promises to give them free methamphetamine.

Other ingredients and materials, such as batteries and plastic tubing, are even more difficult to regulate. A sheriff in one West Virginia county told me about an old friend who ran one of the “country stores” in his jurisdiction. The sheriff had gone around to the owners of these stores to warn them that there were people making meth in the area, and to pay attention to anyone buying a lot of cooking fuel, cold medicine, or batteries, or asking for anything unusual such as plastic tubing. His friend, surprised, told him about someone who had started buying all his cold pills just as quickly as he could stock them, saying he had bad allergies. The sheriff’s friend thought it was strange but had not been aware of people making methamphetamine in the area.

The use of agricultural chemicals such as anhydrous ammonia in the methamphetamine production process indexes the more general association between methamphetamine and the most common forms of labor found in rural areas. Not only has methamphetamine proved symbiotic with these forms of labor, it has also flourished in contexts where they are in decline. Take, for instance, the farming communities of the midwestern United States. These areas have been hit particularly hard by methamphetamine, which began to take root during the decline of family farming and the rise of large-scale agriculture. This led to the displacement of many farmers who were forced to find other means of generating income. In this context of dwindling eco-

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conomic opportunities, selling or making methamphetamine presented itself as an option. There was also an increase in the use of chemical fertilizers such as anhydrous ammonia during this time. Not only was there simply more of the chemical available, but struggling farmers could be tempted to sell their anhydrous ammonia to methamphetamine cooks.

At the same time, rural businesses and manufacturing also began to decline. Factories, for instance, that had once supported well-paying union jobs downsized, outsourced, and sometimes even closed outright. Wages and benefits for those who managed to keep their jobs were cut in some places upwards of 70 percent. Here again, methamphetamine found fertile ground. For those out of work, methamphetamine presented itself as a source of replacement income. For those still working but making less, selling methamphetamine could serve as supplemental income, while taking it could enhance work performance. Meth enabled them to work faster and more efficiently for longer hours—a boon for factory productivity and a salve for workers trying to make up for lost wages. In addition, the euphoric feelings meth produced made the work itself more enjoyable. Finally, be-

cause of its utility in the workplace, using meth resonated with key American values such as resourcefulness, enterprise, and hard work. In this environment, methamphetamine proved attractive to individuals who might otherwise not have engaged in drug use.

Baker County sits at the center of the regional poultry industry. Most of those employed in the area are connected to this industry in some way. For instance, the majority of chicken and turkey farmers in the area—referred to in industry terminology as “growers”—contract with one of the national chains that maintain local operations. Processing plants in the area’s larger towns employ hundreds more. In these plants poultry is processed, packaged and shipped across the nation and around the world. Locally contracted truck drivers transport poultry from the farms to the processing plants, and then from the processing plants to stores and distribution centers, some as far away as California.

In my research, I discovered that methamphetamine was a presence in almost every component of the poultry industry. As noted above, many farmers were connected by virtue of their use of industrial fertilizers like anhydrous ammonia. Although not used in poultry production specifically, many farmers used the chemical to maintain cash or feed crops such as corn. Meth was a more significant presence in the poultry processing plants. Workers on the “live hang” floor, for instance, used it for performance enhancement. Working the live hang floor involved attaching live chickens to an overhead conveyor belt which carried

the birds through the machine that slaughtered them. One of the effects of methamphetamine was that it could encourage the user to engage in repetitive activity. For instance, one user told me that she would obsessively count change and rearrange her sock drawer when she was using meth. Others have reported taking apart and then reassembling television sets and bicycles. For someone working on the live hang floor, this impulse towards repetitive activity enabled them to hang chickens more quickly and efficiently. It would likewise allow them to work longer hours—picking up extra shifts and thus generating more income. Even the pleasurable aspect of meth use was a work boon in that it made tedious and unpleasant work more tolerable.

Methamphetamine could likewise be found among the truck drivers who served the industry. As with employees in the poultry plants, truck drivers had work-based incentives for using methamphetamine. I spoke with one truck driver, Ken Burdette, who began using as a way to stay awake during his tri-monthly trips from West Virginia to California. Ken's father had also been a truck driver, and it was from him that Ken had been introduced to the use of pills for work. Ken and his father used "bennies," the slang name for the drug Benzedrine, a form of amphetamine which was available legally for many years. It was only after sales of Benzedrine were restricted that Ken found methamphetamine. This happened as he was driving his route to California, where methamphetamine was still regionally concentrated. The amount of money one makes as a truck driver depends on the number of

loads one is able to transport, and the speed with which those loads are delivered. Methamphetamine allowed truckers like Ken to work beyond their natural capacities—to keep driving rather than sleep—thereby making deliveries faster and more frequently. Ken himself would use his week off each month to make additional deliveries in the area. And as Ken's meth use increased, he began to transport it from the west coast east, even selling some himself along the way. This helped pay for his own use, and formed part of the initial eastward spread of methamphetamine.

Officials in the poultry industry were aware that methamphetamine was being used by their employees and instituted procedures to try and eliminate it. At the processing plant, new employees were required to pass a drug test as a condition of employment and were subject to random drug screens intended to both identify meth users within the workforce and scare off those who feared being identified, most of whom chose to quit rather than submit to the drug test.

Former employees laughed at such efforts, however, stating that they were a public-relations campaign more than a good

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faith effort at deterrence. The reality, they stated, was that meth use was openly tolerated and even encouraged by some administrators at the plant. Justin Stokes described an incident in which he was caught by his manager using meth at work. Rather than being reported or fired, his “punishment” was to share his methamphetamine with his manager. Justin said it was not uncommon for employees to sell or use meth before or during work. He had even seen people trade sex for meth in the parking lot.

Even though methamphetamine was attractive for its promise of performance enhancement in a work context, it could just as easily take root where such work was hard to find. Indeed, though it was a dominant economic force in the area, the poultry industry was, nevertheless, subject to boom and bust cycles. The work history of Mike Auerbach, who was arrested with his wife, Wanda, for illegal distribution of methamphetamine, was a testament to this. Mike was a truck driver. He began using methamphetamine first as a means of performance enhancement and later as a form of recreation. Over the ten-year period leading up to his arrest, Mike was hired and then laid off from three separate trucking jobs with poultry plants in the area. In each case his termination was the sole result of the plant in question closing or cutting back its operations, not poor work performance on Mike’s part.

Both Mike and Wanda were unemployed and using methamphetamine when they moved in together. They purchased their meth from a contact in Virginia. Eventually they began selling it themselves. Wanda did

most of the selling to a small network of friends. Mike would occasionally assist by driving Wanda to a sale or helping at home. During the undercover drug buy that led to Mike and Wanda’s arrest, Mike offered the buyer a twist tie for the plastic bag that contained the meth. When the buyer accepted, Mike took the bag from his hand, put a twist tie around it and gave it back to him. This made him an accomplice and allowed him to be arrested with Wanda.

Mike’s movement from using to selling meth followed a familiar trajectory. He began using as a way to improve his performance at work. Boom and bust cycles within the poultry industry led to extended bouts of unemployment during which time methamphetamine provided a source of recreation and a modest supplemental income. This, in turn, led to his arrest. And with a felony drug conviction now on his record, his options for employment are unlikely to improve. Ironically, the poultry plants are often the only employers in the area willing to hire individuals with felony convictions.

In the wake of methamphetamine, the problems associated with illicit drugs can no longer be confined rhetorically to urban communities, just as rural communities may find it hard to maintain their image as a refuge from such urban problems. To this end, methamphetamine has introduced something new into the national discourse surrounding illicit drugs in the United States. Methamphetamine has provided a new language for talking about the problems facing rural America. Methamphetamine is thus both a problem in its own right and indicative of deeper concerns.

At the same time, methamphetamine has prompted a repetition of more familiar patterns. Most evidently, these have to do with the response which has centered around punitive strategies that, in general, have not taken into consideration the unique challenges of engaging in drug enforcement (to say nothing of treatment or prevention) in a rural context. These include limited resources and infrastructure; low population density, but high density of acquaintance-ship; the added stigma of struggling with addiction in a close-knit community; and the massive time and expense associated with meth-lab cleanup, which actually discourages discovery and reporting on the part of local authorities fearful of inheriting the cost.

But more fundamentally, methamphetamine has repeated the same pattern of drawing-attention-to-while-obfuscating the broader web of problems being faced in communities where drugs have emerged as a key concern. To be sure, methamphetamine cannot be reduced to the decline of the family farm, the rise of industrialized agriculture, or the impact of globalization on rural livelihoods any more than it can be blamed solely on its pharmacological properties. Nevertheless, this context is essential for understanding why methamphetamine emerged, and emerged with such force, in the rural United States at the moment that it did.

The consequences of meth's emergence in rural America are still unfolding. In Baker County, methamphetamine had a distinct social impact. This was not simply the result of the drug itself but likewise efforts em-

ployed to address its harmful effects. These included, most conspicuously, legislation targeting domestic production and public awareness campaigns aimed at identifying the symptoms of methamphetamine use. These efforts sought to mobilize the public to combat the meth problem by drawing attention to the signs of methamphetamine manufacture and use in the community. While evidence suggests that these approaches have achieved a degree of success on their own terms, their broader impact has been to encourage a new mode of imagining and navigating the social and physical landscape in rural communities centered around methamphetamine. In this way, methamphetamine has come to define—in every sense of the term—what it means to live in contemporary rural America.

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