

Ice epidemic poses a broad economic threat for Hawaii

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How Hawaii's crystal methamphetamine problem is taking its toll on businesses, the economy and the community.

While Hawaii spent most of the '90s in the economic doldrums, in a rather ironic twist, an insidious economic boom was beginning to take shape for dealers of the drug crystal meth -- or "ice" as it's known on the street.

The use of ice in Hawaii skyrocketed in the 1990s, cutting a swath across every strata of society and destroying many in the process. Its impact is the subject of an hour-long documentary by Hawaii filmmaker Edgy Lee that premiered this week.

The U.S. Attorney's Office here estimates there are as many as 30,000 crystal meth users in the state who spend between \$540 million to \$1.8 billion annually based on a \$50 to \$170 per day habit (which would buy between one-sixteenth of a gram to one-sixteenth of an ounce daily).

"Our estimates are based on the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area, a state and federal cooperative initiative," said U.S. Attorney Ed Kubo. "Hawaii has the highest usage of ice in the country."

Though neither private nor government agencies track overall crystal meth costs here in terms of law enforcement and treatment (see related stories on pages 13 and 14), according to a study done by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, \$437.8 million was spent here in 1998 alone on corrections, education, counseling and other related programs.

Besides wreaking social havoc here, the ice problem is sucking hundreds of millions of dollars out of Hawaii in a perverse economic drain.

"That money is leaving Hawaii," Kubo said. "It's all going back to the mainland, California in particular. As much as 99 percent of the ice is coming from the mainland."

Hawaii is being hurt economically in three distinct ways, Kubo said.

"You have all this money leaving the state with nothing to show for it," he said. "You have all these burdens to society with the cost of treatment. And the third factor, which nobody is really seeing yet, is the environmental impact."

At Hina Mauka, Hawaii's largest drug and alcohol treatment center, ice as the primary drug among new patients has risen dramatically in recent years.

"Four years ago the primary drug at admission was alcohol," said CEO Any Anderson. "Today, it's crystal meth, which accounts for 55 percent of new patients." Ninety percent of all patients list ice as either their first or second choice of drugs, he said.

Like other local treatment centers, Hina Mauka doesn't track the cost of specifically treating ice patients.

"But treatment requires so much more from counselors because the ice problem is so severe and clients are much sicker," said Managing Director Alan Johnson. "We used to have counselor ratios of between 10 and 12 patients per residential counselor. And now it's between six and 8."

The state doesn't have an aggregate number on what the ice problem costs, said Sen. Melodie Aduja, D-Kaneohe-Kahuku, co-chairwoman of a joint House-Senate task force on ice and drug abatement convened in June.

"I'm sure by next year we'll have some numbers," she said.

Eighty percent of violent crimes and domestic violence here is ice related, said Aduja, who in addition to being a former city prosecutor also is a Hina Mauka board member.

"The most egregious crimes I prosecuted were all drug related and mostly dealt with ice," Aduja said. "We haven't experienced anything like this before in which the addict has no respect or regard for anyone else."

The ice task force has held five information briefings on Oahu alone, hearing 22 hours of testimony from 46 speakers, Aduja said. The committee also has heard 18 hours of testimony from more than 103 speakers on the neighbor islands. They also have visited community drug treatment programs on five islands where they heard from recovering crystal meth users and the staff who treat them.

"There are 150 to 300 people per day wait-listed for available beds in live-in treatment centers," Aduja said.

Use of crystal meth also is a problem among Hawaii's prison population.

"We know 20 percent of the prison population are crystal meth addicts," Aduja said.

It costs \$6,000 a year to counsel and treat a person through Drug Court here, \$18,000 a year to house an inmate in a mainland facility and \$30,000 to house an inmate here, she said.

State officials have only recently begun to understand the depth of the problem in Hawaii, said Jim Hall, a legislative analyst with the House Minority Research Office, who helped his 22-year-old daughter kick her ice addiction.

He recalled one session at the Bobby Benson Center, a residential and outpatient treatment center on the North Shore, where a beleaguered Hawaii Kai parent expressed the state's outlook on the ice problem.

"She said a teacher understands, sometimes a counselor understands, sometimes even a policeman understands, but the state of Hawaii's in a state of denial," Hall recalled.

That was six years ago.

"My daughter's been clean and sober for five years," he said. "She wanted help. She didn't fight me."

Hall said his message for young people is they can turn their lives around. His message to parents is to never give up. And his message to state officials is an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

"I attended the Hawaii Drug Control Strategy Summit [last week] and they kept talking about where are we going to get the money?," he said. "I kept telling people, it's not getting the money. If you don't treat a person, next thing you know he's in the hospital, not going to work, robbing a store."

By the numbers:

\$50 to \$170 a day

What addicts will spend to support their habit. This would buy between 1/16th of a gram and 1/16th of an ounce.

\$540 million to \$1.8 billion

Estimated annual expenditure for ice by an estimated 30,000 users.

\$437.8 million

One-year Hawaii expenditure on corrections, education, counseling and other programs due to substance abuse.