

Hawaii and Crystal Meth

Insidious Drug Destroys the People of Paradise

By **Jamie K. Wilson**

Don Ho died recently in Honolulu, his death devastating everyone in Hawaii who loved and appreciated him. But no one mourned him harder than his daughter, Dayna Ho Henry, who had cared for Don Ho in his last days. Within a week, she had also died.

As hard as that was for the family, the hardest was yet to come: Dayna Ho Henry died of a methamphetamine overdose, according to the Honolulu medical examiner. That means that the drug that has ravaged Hawaii over the last twenty years has penetrated even the highest levels of Hawaiian society and culture.

Nothing, not the Christian missionary movement in the 1800s, not the takeover of the islands in the late 1800s by the plantation owners, nothing has so threatened Hawaiian culture like this drug does.

Crystal Methamphetamine In Hawaii

Crystal meth was introduced to Hawaii in the 1980s through Asia. Today, most meth in Hawaii comes from Mexico and California, even though it is also produced locally; the imported version is hailed by users as a purer form, and it's easier to smoke, the preferred method of ingestion.

By 2001, 38.1% of newly-incarcerated men tested positive for methamphetamines. In 2002, that number increased to a boggling 44.8%. Compared to the approximately 33% testing positive in California prisons during that same time, and it is clear that Hawaii has a really serious problem.

Deaths due to meth quadrupled in Oahu from 1993 to 2003.

About 85% of child abuse cases in Hawaii are thought to be related to methamphetamine use. Investigations of such cases are up about 30% from 1998; before 1998, the caseload had been steady for almost a decade.

Methamphetamine seizures are twice as high as cocaine, marijuana, and heroin combined in Hawaii; most seizures involve flights from California.

Nationally, 14.2% of drug treatment cases involve methamphetamines. In Hawaii, more than half of them do.

And by 2002, meth became the most-abused substance in Oahu, beating out even alcohol.

No one knows how widespread methamphetamine use is in Hawaii. It may be as many as 10% of the overall permanent population of the state - 120,000 people out of 1.2 million. Close-knit families and social groups helped accelerate the spread of the drug, and the lack of organized crime in Hawaii when crystal meth moved in made it even easier.

If it were only a health issue, that would be one thing. But Hawaii has historically been known for its peaceful nature. For a very long time, there was only a trace rate of violent crime on any of the islands. Today, a crime wave including domestic violence, psychotic behavior, and theft has embraced the island.

How bad is it? I live in a military housing area next to Pearl Harbor, and for over a year there have been cyclic surges of robberies; my neighbor's door was kicked in while they slept one night. Housing hired security teams to patrol, but when that didn't work, they began installing monitored security systems in all the houses - a very expensive solution. Housing is pretty sure this is organized gangs of thieves.

Though statistics on methamphetamine use are hard to come by for the homeless population here, it is clear that meth use is much higher among them. Homelessness has gone up by about 38% from 2005 on Oahu. Most local authorities think the two issues are related.

It's very difficult to express what it's like to drive through Oahu today. In some neighborhoods, like Hawaii Kai, things look like something out of a tourist brochure. But along Waikiki, along some of the most beautiful North Shore beaches or on the West Shore, tent villages housing the homeless are easy to find. In every park I've visited, a shopping cart filled with some homeless person's worldly possessions has been prominent. Meth addicts are easy to spot when you walk near them. I've lived in a lot of places, but I've never seen anything quite like this.

Takeaways

- Don Ho's daughter died recently of a crystal meth overdose.
- Meth beats out alcohol as the most-abused drug in Hawaii.
- Violent crime has risen even faster than meth use.

What is Hawaii doing? Being overwhelmed, I think. Incarceration rates are way up, and it's hard to make the decision to jail an addict who hasn't committed a violent crime when you only have a few cells to spare. Treatment facilities are packed and underfunded. Child welfare agencies are overloaded.

Unfortunately, there is little that can be done without strong grassroots community support; Hawaii is all about local community, ohana (family), and their historical culture. Perhaps, with the death of Don Ho's daughter due to a meth overdose, that grassroots movement will develop quickly. If not, Hawaii's days as a thriving culture may be numbered.

More resources

<http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/West/09/13/hawaii.meth.ap/>

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