The ice epidemic

BY SANDRA SOLDO

The increasing popularity of the drug “ice” has, and will continue to have, a huge impact on Australian police resources. The growing use and damaging effects of the drug are now widely reported in the media. We might not yet have reached an ice epidemic, but all the signs certainly indicate that we are headed for one.

Of course, front-line police officers see firsthand the many problems associated with the drug – the damaging physical and mental effects on users, and the link between ice use and crime rates.

Highly addictive

Crystal methamphetamine hydrochloride (ice) is a highly addictive stimulant of the central nervous system. Users inject, snort or smoke it, or ingest it orally. In its purest form, ice has an average purity of 80 per cent, while the average purity of “base” (the damp, oily form of methamphetamine) is 20 per cent, and “speed” (the powder form of methamphetamine) 10 per cent.

Over the past five years, the supply and use of methamphetamine has grown in Australia. Seizures of amphetamine-type stimulants (including methamphetamine) increased from 156kg in 1996-97 to more than 1.8 tons in 2001–02. This came as increases occurred in both domestic production of methamphetamine and the importation of high-purity ice methamphetamine.

Crystal methamphetamine is in abundant supply and readily available. Ice can be easily produced in small clandestine labs, or even kitchens and bathrooms, using a variety of ingredients available in shops. It is also relatively cheap, selling for about $45 per gram.

Effects of ice

The physical and psychological effects of ice on a user can include:

- Feelings of euphoria, excitement and wellbeing which can last from 20 minutes to more than 12 hours.
- Increased alertness, confidence and more energy.
- Feelings of increased strength.

The Australian Drug Foundation has found that the long-term and even occasional use of ice can cause a number of health issues, including:

- High blood pressure, increased risk of heart attack and heart failure.
- Malnutrition and rapid weight loss owing to reduced appetite.
- Chronic sleeping problems.
- Depression, anxiety, tension and paranoia.

According to Australia’s National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, increasing numbers of people aged from 16 to 25 are smoking ice socially, making it the second most used drug after cannabis. Victorian Health CEO Rob Moodie has said: “It takes only seven seconds from taking a puff to the instant brain hit, three times faster than injecting. Dependent users spiral from highs lasting days into withdrawal and depression.”

Ice-smoking among young recreational users is a particular concern because it provides an instant effect and has a high dependence liability. The danger with crystal methamphetamine is that ice-users can quickly develop a tolerance to the drug and therefore require greater doses to achieve the desired effects.

Experts say that crystal methamphetamine is one of the most addictive street drugs and one of the hardest to treat. A recent National Drugs and Alcohol Research Centre study estimates that there are about 103,000 regular methamphetamine-users in Australia. Of those, almost 75 per cent (about 73,000) are dependent ice-users. This high percentage of drug dependency reflects the extremely addictive nature of methamphetamine.

The National Drugs and Alcohol Centre produced figures which indicate that there are some 37,000 regular amphetamine-users in NSW aged from 15 to 49, and 28,000 of them admit to addiction. This represents almost 76 per cent dependency.

In 2004, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) conducted a National Drug Strategy Household Survey and found that 2.3 per cent of Australians aged 14 and older had used amphetamines for non-medical purposes in the previous year. More than 38 per cent of this group reported that the type of amphetamine they used was ice. This is worrying evidence, particularly in light of the coming-down effect of the drug on users. As the effects of ice wear off, the user might experience a range of symptoms, including:

- Depression.
- Tension.
- Radical mood swings.
- Uncontrollable violence.
- Exhaustion.

Almost half of all ice-users surveyed in a recent report had physical problems ranging from sleep disturbances to weight loss and heart palpitations. Two thirds suffered from some form of mental-health disability.

Psychosis and mental illness

A recent study found that rates of psychosis among regular methamphetamine-users were 11 times that seen among the general population. Almost one in four (23 per cent) participants had experienced symptoms of psychosis in the past year. Psychosis was also common (18 per cent) among people who had had no known history of schizophrenia or other psychotic disorders.

The potentially dangerous psychotic behaviour ice-users exhibit includes auditory hallucinations, mood disturbances, delusions and paranoia, possibly resulting in homicide or suicidal thoughts. Commissioner Ken Moroney (NSW) has publicly discussed the clear connection between ice and mental illness, and the high rates of violence. “We know that those using it and those using it for the first time, are having to seek all sorts of long-term medical treatment, be it physical treatment or mental-health treatment,” he said.

In the recent study, half the methamphetamine-users who had experienced psychotic symptoms during the past year felt hostile or aggressive at the time. One in four users had, while he or she was psychotic, exhibited overt hostile behaviour, such as yelling at people, throwing furniture or hitting people.

These violent psychotic episodes by ice-users continue to come with a huge impact on police and other...
front-line workers. Today, police with neither the resources nor the mental-health knowledge continue to be called – as the free 24-7 mobile emergency service which they are – to deal with the mentally ill. But add to this the growing use of ice and the high level of dependency associated with it. Is it not obvious that, for police, the situation will deteriorate to a point of extreme danger? Sadly, members of the community will suffer the fallout.

As more and more police resources are diverted toward dealing with ice-users, in terms of their crimes and psychotic episodes, officers’ first-response commitments to the community will suffer. Too few front-line police will be left to deal with those commitments, resulting in a backlog of jobs.

Police respond not only to calls to deal with the mentally ill but also ice-users suffering psychotic episodes. This is extremely resource-intensive work places police officers’ safety at great risk.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, hospital admissions for psychosis, owing to amphetamines, have increased by 60 per cent from 2000 to 2004. So seriously has St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney, taken the problem of dealing with ice-users who undergo violent psychotic episodes that it has developed a special ward to contain them. According to the hospital’s head of Emergency, Dr Gordion Fulde, staff use the equivalent of elephant tranquilizers to sedate violent ice-users in the special containment room. Tellingly, he has described the time when heroin dominated the scene as “the good old days”. His comment puts into perspective the difficulties police face in managing ice-users suffering psychosis.

Police face great risk of physical injury whenever they act to restrain ice-users suffering amphetamine psychosis. The Gladstone Observer reported last month that an unprovoked 36-year-old man, who regularly used ice, violently assaulted a 16-year-old boy. When police officers tried to restrain him, he punched one of them several times in the face. The officer suffered a broken nose and severe facial injuries, which required surgery. It eventually took four police officers to restrain the man.

The ice epidemic presents formidable challenges to policing. Police are being compelled to look toward alternative methods of restraint, as capsicum spray often proves ineffective with ice-users suffering psychotic episodes.

In October 2006, the then police minister, Carl Scully, spoke of a trial involving taser guns. “One of the reasons we’re looking at taser guns is (the need) for some of these people who (experience) psychotic episodes ... to be restrained,” he said. “It’s very difficult for conventional policing procedures to deal with it.”

**Ice use and violent crime**

A strong correlation exists between ice use and violent crime. Commissioner Ken Moroney has said the greatest challenge facing NSW Police is the ice epidemic. “I don’t know in all the time I’ve been a policeman, which is 41 years, of a greater scourge on the community,” he said. “The physical and mental manifestations of this drug are absolutely horrific. It has the potential to destroy generations.” NSW Premier Morris Iemma told Parliament of a recent study of 3,000 emergency department records in NSW hospitals. It showed that 56 per cent of ice-users were addicted to the drug, and 45 per cent had committed a crime in the past month.

According to figures released in October 2006 by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, and the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), the number of people arrested for methamphetamine in NSW has more than doubled over the past decade.

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<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>No. of methamphetamine arrests in NSW</th>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>1,114</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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There were 1,114 arrests for methamphetamine in 1995, and 3,091 in 2005. This represents an increase of more than 253 per cent in the past 10 years.

Over this same period, assault rates in NSW rose from 522 per 100,000 people in 1995, to 942 per 100,000 people in 2005. The report concluded that, although methamphetamine use can lead to violent behaviour in some situations, it is likely to be one of a number of factors contributing to the increasing assault rate in NSW.

The report’s author, Dr Rebecca McKetin, asserted that: "Front-line policing and health bear the brunt of drug-induced psychosis and there is a need to improve the capacity of the workforce in how to manage the aggressive behaviour that often occurs with this condition."
Data collected in another recent study revealed that criminal involvement and consequent contact with the criminal justice system was high among regular methamphetamine users. Almost half (45 per cent) had committed an offence in the past month, one in four (26 per cent) had been arrested in the past year, and one in three had served a prison sentence in his or her lifetime. Courts have recorded a rise in the number of ice addict-driven crime, with the most common types being dealing and property offences.

A recent study found that alcohol use increased the likelihood of violent crime among ice-users. Almost one in three of the methamphetamine-users surveyed was under the influence of methamphetamine the last time he or she committed a violent crime. Methamphetamine use was reported to make the person feel more alert, confident and aggressive while undertaking violent crime.

Since October 2004, robbery without a weapon has increased by 32 per cent in Canterbury-Bankstown, 32.5 per cent in Central Western Sydney, and 39 per cent in Blacktown.

Since October 2004, recorded criminal incidents involving break-and-enter have increased by 25 per cent in outer Western Sydney.

Police believe the growing use of ice is helping to fuel the rise in crime. NSW Police Minister Watkins responded to the rise in robbery by saying: “People on ice have the propensity to use more violent means.”

NSW Police Commissioner Ken Moroney has said that, although ice is not an explanation for every robbery, it does clearly have an impact: “It manifests itself in many forms ... one of those forms is a proliferation of violence,” he said. “When it’s coupled with alcohol, when it’s coupled with abuse of other substances, when it’s coupled with ... other illnesses such as mental illness, certainly these aberrations are showing themselves up in the numbers of people and the range of incidents with which police are having to deal.”

The US experience

One need only look to the US to find a strong correlation between ice use and crime. Today, one of the toughest crime challenges facing American law enforcers is the methamphetamine epidemic.

According to the 2005 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), an estimated 10.4 million Americans aged 12 or older used methamphetamine at least once in their lifetimes for non-medical reasons. This represents 4.3 per cent of the US population in that age group.

From 1994 to 2004, the number of admissions for treatment, in which methamphetamine was the primary drug of abuse, increased from 33,443 in 1994 to 129,079 in 2004.

In 2004, one third of all law enforcement agencies identified methamphetamine as the drug that most contributed to both property and violent crime in their jurisdictions. In Spokane, Washington, ice-users commit 70 per cent of burglaries, 80 per cent of vehicle thefts and 95 per cent of credit-card fraud. In Oregon, ice-users account for 85 per cent of all burglaries.

Oregon corrections deputy Brett King has said: “The connection in my community between methamphetamine and crime is so strong that most addicts that pass through our jails are not arrested for having the drug, but for the crimes they commit in connection to their addiction.”