

A MADNESS CALLED METH: CALIFORNIA'S SOCIAL, MEDICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL NIGHTMARE

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PROLOGUE

The little girl is 4 and wise beyond her years.

She tugs on the woman's bullet-proof vest. "I know what you came for," she whispers.

Down the hallway in her mother's bedroom, she opens the top drawer of a bureau to display baggies of methamphetamine, scales, homemade pipes used to smoke the drug, and account books that document sales.

She describes in detail how her mother had smoked a pipe of crank that morning and explains that she'd been sleeping with her mommy for several days because the dog had pooped in her bed and nobody had bothered to clean it up.

"People come to visit Mommy, and they bring money. It's green, and it has a two and a zero," she says. "She gives them little baggies with white stuff."

Then the little girl with the long, brown ponytail and cherubic smile goes off with a social worker to McDonald's for a Happy Meal, before heading to the hospital for a complete physical.

Eventually, she will live the rest of her childhood with strangers. Her mother will end up in jail. Or dead.

INTRODUCTION

From Redding to Bakersfield, methamphetamine ensnares thousands. Some are willing participants, stepping into meth's web to feed the hunger that creates drug addicts. Some are trapped: the children, spouses, parents and siblings of meth users.

The meth trade, perhaps one of the largest businesses in the Central Valley, is booming. Federal, state and local law enforcement agents discovered more than 2,000 meth and meth-related labs in California last year, an average of more than five a day and a dramatic increase over the 559 labs discovered just five years ago. So much meth is made here -- as much as 80 percent of all meth manufactured in the nation -- that it has become a leading California export to other states. It's made by a variety of human spiders, from pathetic small-timers who labor in settings that would be laughable if they weren't so dangerous to sophisticated drug lords who pay others to work in well-equipped super labs.

Meth kills people or makes them wish they were dead. Users age prematurely and their teeth may rot, relatively benign side effects to a drug that also can induce heart damage and psychoses.

The children of meth users suffer physically and psychologically. They are neglected, abused and sometimes even killed by their parents. If their parents make meth, the children live amid toxic chemicals. If their parents are arrested, the children often end up living with strangers. In the Central Valley, more than 20,000 children are in foster care; in some areas, social workers estimate up to 90 percent of their cases are meth-related. If a drug is involved in the death of a child, experts say it is by far most likely to be meth.

The meth industry has manufactured thousands of gallons of toxic wastes that are dumped into rivers and irrigation canals and onto some of the nation's richest farmland. But not all manufacturing is done at locations populated by crops or cows. Labs show up in warehouses, suburban neighborhoods, hotel rooms and even the trunks of cars. California taxpayers spend \$10 million a year on efforts to clean them up.

Meth is California's unpaid bill. It comes due in hospitals and schools, jails and courtrooms, neighborhoods and farm fields. And you pay it. Maybe it's through higher taxes or higher insurance rates. Maybe it's less direct, like waiting longer for a cop to show up to your emergency because he is tied up at a meth bust, or having your child's school lessons slowed down because of problems with the kids whose parents are addicts, or having your plumbing repaired twice because the guy who did it the first time had a head full of meth and messed it up.

Whatever it is, you pay for it.

This is the story of meth: what it is, how it got here and why. More importantly, it's a story about the people caught in its web. All the people are real, and you may know them or know someone who does. If you don't, you eventually will.

Chapter One

The Family Who Cranks Together: Meth Disintegrates a Family

Kelly McGhee is bustling around his office, setting up the day's operations. It's 8:20 on a Thursday morning. A half-dozen probation officers, wearing identical sand-colored military pants and black combat boots, wander in and out, briefing McGhee on case details as they formulate a hit list of 10 probationers and decide which ones to go after first.

A compact, blond-haired, blue-eyed 18-year veteran of the Sacramento County Probation Department, McGhee heads the 6-month-old "response team." It's the department's version of a police SWAT team, a precision-trained crew of seven aggressive officers who track down probationers gone AWOL and barge into homes knowing they quite possibly are bursting into a den of drug dealers. Three of the seven are sure shots, instructors at the Probation Department's shooting range.

Kelly Gould wanders in, papers in hand, memorizing a drivers license photograph. Gould, a 35-year-old native Iowan who took three months off last winter to train police forces in Kosovo, is the team's only female member. She laughs at the photo of a 17-year-old meth addict, who has her hair swept to one side and a decided pout on her lips.

"Cindy Crawford," she nicknames the teen, wanted for violating probation. "It's funny. We have DMV photos, and they look like this. But when you finally find them, they're virtually unrecognizable," prematurely aged by meth use.

By 9:30, Gould is headed for North Sacramento to do a drive-by of her suspect's last known address. Her teammates are doing the same, checking to see if their targets are home before they begin busting down doors.



In an apartment complex across town, Terri smokes her first meth, or "crank," of the day. As she expertly waves a butane lighter beneath the glass bowl of her pipe, her 10-month-old son plays in a walker on the living room floor.

Timothy has just learned to crawl and, given the chance, he motors around the house, exploring. There are photographs of Timothy in every room, a baby's first-year calendar in the kitchen to mark his milestones and an assortment of toys stashed in his room and the living room. He is the first child of Terri and her companion, Paul.

At 9:36, Gould's two-way radio crackles. It's another probation officer calling the crew to a meeting behind a shuttered credit union. Terri and Paul are home. It's time to meet. As the fleet of shiny, new cars pulls into the parking lot, the team is joined by two social workers from Child Protective Services. If the parents are dealing, the baby probably will be taken into protective custody and placed in foster care.

By 10:20, the team has been briefed and is in place. The probationer, Paul, who has prior convictions for meth use and sales, has been overheard threatening to throw Terri off their second-floor balcony for smoking his drugs. Paul's probation officer says the addict has tested "dirty" for crank twice in recent months. He passes around Paul's DMV photo.

"He's tall, blond. Beach-boy-looking guy," says the probation officer.

"He's got all his teeth," observes one team member.

"For now," another cracks.

Terri has her own history with crank. Three times she has been placed on informal probation. Twice she was caught with meth in her possession, and once she was found under the influence of the drug. At 22, her teeth are beginning to blacken, her body beginning to sag. As the probation team approaches, Terri and Paul are on their balcony chatting with a friend, who also is on probation. Behind them, Timothy plays in his walker, sucking on a disposable bottle of formula and gnawing on an animal cracker.



At 10:27 a.m., guns drawn, the probation team closes in.

"Freeze," orders one officer.

Terri bolts into the apartment, but Paul throws his hands in the air. He knows the game is over.

Sacramento probation officers Kelly Gould and Steve McKee routinely track down probationers, knowing that most likely a day's work will include bursting into the homes of drug dealers. Meth dealers are an increasing part of the drug scene. At this home, the probationer was cooperative and no drugs were found.
Bee Photographer- Hector Amezcua

Inside the two-bedroom apartment, nine probation officers and two social workers fall into a familiar routine. Two beefy officers begin searching the adults' bedroom for signs of narcotics as Gould strip searches Terri and questions her. She admits smoking crank earlier and she's got more dope on her, but she denies dealing. Paul has some crank on him, a baggie of chunks the size of puffed rice but with the waxy, yellow appearance of bar soap.

At first, the only other evidence officers find is Terri's pipe, now cold. It has been shoved beneath a tan ottoman in the living room, a few feet from Timothy's walker.

It's 10:45 a.m. The baby stares up at the strangers. He doesn't appear afraid, just curious. His father sits handcuffed on a recliner a few feet to Timothy's left. His mother and a family friend face him on the couch. They, too, are handcuffed and sitting awkwardly.

McGhee, himself the father of two children, 11 and 15, drops to one knee to soothe the baby. "Hi there," he says, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes. "Hi, little guy."

Timothy stares at him expressionless. But Timothy's mother suddenly realizes what is about to happen. "No!" she wails, her face dissolving into tears. "Please don't take my baby away."

The officers' faces are like masks. They've heard it so many times. In the Central Valley, more

than 20,000 children are living in foster care: more than 6,000 in Sacramento County, 733 in Stanislaus County and more than 3,000 in Fresno County. The vast majority of them are from drug homes, and most have parents who are addicted to meth. CPS workers remove children like Timothy every day.

Paul leans forward, eyes bleary from drugs. "Hi, baby," he says, smiling. "Daddy loves you." Timothy's face breaks into a dimpled smile. He kicks his feet and waves his arms wildly. "Da Da Da," he cries, gleefully.

McGhee turns away.

At 26, Paul has been addicted to crank for years and sent to jail at least twice. By now, he's used so long he's not quite sure of time anymore. "I can only stay up maybe two or three days," he says, shaking his head. "You start hallucinating. You go without eating for long periods of time. Oh my God, it tears you up. Ages your body. You start picking at things that aren't there. It's the worst."

Paul and Terri met three years ago when she was living with Paul's dealer. It had been a bad relationship. She was glad to escape. Paul took her to a bar a couple of times. They smoked crank together.

"It was convenient," Paul says. Beyond the drugs, though, there's "not much" of a relationship. They argue constantly. They were clean together only once, for a short period right before Timothy was born. Paul had been released from jail; she'd been living with his parents. He got a decent job; they got an apartment. Then he met a guy at the county's probation work project who got him high on crank. In less than a month from the time of his jail release, Paul was spiraling downward.

Terri followed. She had used for years and lost one pregnancy with Paul to a miscarriage that he suspected was because of crank. Paul was in jail when she discovered she was pregnant again. He thinks she smoked crank while she carried Timothy, too, but she denies it.

"He's the cutest baby in the whole world," says Paul, shaking his head sadly. "I wish I could have been a better father for him. . . . I tried to do good for my son. I just got caught up in this dope s*** again."

He spouts reservations about Terri's mothering skills: "Yeah, she's a good mom -- when she's not using." Then he reconsiders. "I've never known her to be clean long enough to know how she would act under normal circumstances." And when she comes down from a high, he says, she worries him. "I hear the baby, and I'm up right away. But she isn't. She lets him cry. It bothers me."

It has been about 30 minutes since the team burst in. In the back bedroom, senior probation officer Michael Brooks is digging through the garbage. He finds a dozen or more tiny pieces of

thin plastic, twisted and torn, but empty. Nearby is a box of unused sandwich baggies.

Brooks thinks the shreds of baggies, or "bindles," indicate a dealer. But he can't find the dope or any money. Terri's got a fresh \$20 bill in her wallet; Paul has three crisp twenties in his. But that's all the money in the apartment. Brooks keeps digging. On the other side of the room, senior probation officer Steve McKee digs through a pile of Terri's clothing.

Gould returns from her car where she has grabbed a Valtox chemical kit to test the drugs. Officers want to make sure what they suspect is meth is, in fact, the drug. She sets the kit up in the bathroom, balancing it on a strip of counter amid Terri's lotions and makeup.

To her right, the toilet lid is closed. Officers checked the toilet after they got inside, suspecting that Terri had tried to flush her drugs when she bolted from the patio. They found nothing. Since then, though, Terri has used the toilet. A probation officer asks Gould if he can use the restroom, then laughs and backs out. A baggie of drugs floats on top of the water in the toilet.

A "twompsack," Paul calls it -- \$20 worth of crank, enough to keep the average meth user buzzing for up to eight hours.



At 11:30 a.m., convinced that Timothy's well-being is endangered, CPS workers place him in protective custody. As Terri again begins to sob, tossing her mane of blond hair and gasping for breath, one social worker steps forward, deftly plucks Timothy from his walker, pivots and walks out.

"My inhaler," Terri gasps. "My asthma. I can't breathe."

McGhee retrieves Terri's inhaler from the back bedroom, where McKee has turned his attention to the closet and Brooks is digging through a bedside table. In minutes, McKee hits pay dirt.

In a sandwich-sized, Dodger-blue, zippered makeup bag are two more glass pipes, a portable scale and more than a half-dozen baggies of meth, all packaged for sale. McGhee gives the order to call for a major-narcotics investigator to help catalog the evidence.

The drug detective estimates Paul and Terri's stash to be worth between \$400 and \$600 -- roughly 1 to 1.5 ounces of crank.

On the nightstand, Brooks finds a jar of MSM, a veterinary substance used by horseshoers to increase joint flexibility and by meth dealers to dilute their product. On a small table nearby sits a crude pipe made from an old baby food jar and a credit union pen.

"In all likelihood, we interrupted them as they split up" to sell, Brooks says.

By noon, the telephone is ringing incessantly. The first few times, Brooks answers, trying to ferret out information on potential customers. But the calls are so frequent he quits answering. Just after noon, the first of two major-narcotics investigators arrives. Gould has parked herself at the kitchen table and is handling a seemingly endless stream of paperwork: three individual arrest reports for the jail, separate reports for the Probation Department because each of the three is on probation, supplemental reports to forward to the Sheriff's Department on the new meth-dealing case.

McGhee passes out Diet Pepsi and Seven-Up to quiet grumbling stomachs and cancels a 1:30 p.m. appointment. In the back bedroom, McGhee tries to tune out Terri's renewed sobbing. This time it is triggered by the sound of a neighbor baby wailing for attention.

"I have a 2-year-old at home," McKee says. "And the saddest thing for me is to hear the moms cry. As adults, they make their own choices. But the child doesn't have a choice. That's what's sad."

The trio on the couch is exhausted and uncomfortable. A probation officer checks Paul's handcuffs to see if they are too tight. McGhee calls Paul into the baby's room to see if he wants to chat.

"Oh God," Paul moans. "It's hell. That s*** controls your life. Nothing matters. You'll sell anything for it. I wish I could have gotten help instead of going to jail."

He shakes his head and leans against his son's Tigger-decorated crib.

An hour later, he is again called into Timothy's room, this time by the major-narcotics investigator who wants Paul to give up his dealer in exchange for a lesser charge.

"Terri, I'm taking the heat for all of this," he announces as he returns from the baby's room and slumps into the recliner. "All the dope, all the pipes are mine. Everything in the house is mine. I don't want you to go to jail."

Terri sniffles in appreciation. Her eyes are red and puffy; her blond hair hangs in strings. But she can hear Gould and others talking in the kitchen, consulting on the arrest reports. The family friend will face a charge of associating with known felons. Terri and Paul will face charges of possession for sale, a felony that could send Terri to prison and mean the eventual loss of her son.

As she begins to sob anew, Paul pleads with Gould.

"Is there any way you can pin it on me?" he asks. "Because my son needs a parent."

Found at www.valleymeth.com