

# Methamphetamine in Three Small Midwestern Cities: Evidence of a Moral Panic

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**Abstract**—This study examined the coverage of methamphetamine from 1997 to 2005 by three newspapers serving small Midwestern cities and contrasted their portrayals of methamphetamine problems with available data on the severity of the meth problem in each locality. Results of quantitative and qualitative content analyses show that—to varying degrees, across sites and over time—newspaper coverage of meth was disproportionate to the scale of the meth problem as indicated by site-specific treatment admissions data. To some extent, each of the three newspapers used drug-scare rhetoric (e.g., medical metaphors such as “plague”) to describe the prevalence and effects of meth. Results indicate that two of the three newspapers’ portrayals of meth were conducive to promoting a moral panic over the drug. Potential explanations for variations in coverage are discussed, and findings are considered in light of research on prior drug scares.

**Keyword**—drug scare, media, methamphetamine, moral panic

In the late-1990s, accounts of a methamphetamine epidemic ravaging large swatches of the rural Midwest began to appear in print and broadcast media at both the national and local levels. The typical media story on meth made reference, to varying degrees, to its increasing prevalence, its highly addictive nature and to the harm that its use and manufacture can cause.

How accurate were these widespread accounts in the mass media about the prevalence and effects of meth? The purpose of this study was to see whether media coverage was proportionate to the scope of the problem, or if instead it served to promote a moral panic or scare over meth in three localities in the rural Midwest. To address this question, this study examined the coverage of methamphetamine from 1997 to 2005 by three newspapers serving small

Midwestern cities, and compared newspapers’ portrayals of methamphetamine with available data on the severity of the meth problem in each locality. It investigated whether the scope and nature of newspaper portrayals of local problems associated with methamphetamine were disproportionate to the threat or harm that could be attributed to meth according to data on drug treatment admissions, as well as meth lab seizures. It also considered these local media portrayals and information on prevalence in the context of national print and broadcast media’s portrayals of meth, and national-level information on prevalence.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Drug Scares

For more than a century in the United States, “social problems have often been blamed on the devastating effects of some harmful substance or chemical, and at various times, different substances have been seen as the major demon figures threatening the nation” (Jenkins 1999: 1).

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Drug scares have been described as "periods when antidrug crusades have achieved great prominence and legitimacy" (Reinarman & Levine 1997a: 1). During a drug scare, claimsmakers portray a mind-altering substance as threatening societal institutions from families and communities to schools, businesses, and law enforcement (Reinarman & Levine 1997b). The seriousness ascribed to a given drug problem rarely reflects an objective assessment of the threat that the drug presents. Use of a given drug can occur over many years without being viewed as a problem, and the fact that it is suddenly viewed as an epidemic or crisis does not necessarily mean that the prevalence of its use or abuse has changed (Jenkins 1999).

The most significant drug scare of the recent past was the crack scare of 1986-1992. The crack scare was characterized by unsubstantiated media reports about prevalence. For example:

Tom Brokaw reported on NBC Nightly News in 1986 . . . that crack was "flooding America" and that it had become "America's drug of choice." . . . Yet, at the time of these press reports, there were no prevalence statistics at all on crack and no evidence of any sort showing that smoking crack had become the preferred mode even of cocaine use, much less drug use. (Reinarman & Levine 1997b: 28)

Exaggerated claims about crack's addictiveness also characterized this scare. The assumption that crack cocaine is instantly addictive and inevitably results in the destitution of its users has been refuted (see, for example: Jackson-Jacobs 2004; Reinarman, Murphy & Waldorf 1994). Although most of those who tried crack did not continue to use it, claims belying this reality still appeared in the media. For example, in a 1986 cover story, "*Newsweek* quoted, without skepticism, a drug expert who stated that 'crack is the most addictive substance known to man' and that smoking crack produces 'instantaneous addiction'" (Reinarman & Levine 1997a: 3). "In the ensuing national coverage of crack, [t]he words 'plague,' 'epidemic,' and 'crisis' became routine. The *New York Times*, for example, did a three-part, front-page series called 'The Crack Plague' [in 1988]" (Reinarman & Levine 1997b: 20). The scale and tenor of media coverage about crack, spurred on by politicians, made a drug that was truly a significant problem in only a handful of neighborhoods nationwide into a focal point of concern for society as a whole.

Drug scares and moral panics are harmful in that they make subjective mountains out of objective molehills (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994: 36). The use of disaster analogies to describe the consequences of failing to attack the problem leads to official responses that are out of proportion to the true nature (the "reality") of the problem. Such official responses usually result in greater social control, yet actions that are touted as solutions—e.g., enhancing criminal sentences for trafficking in the targeted substance (see Tonry 1995, for a discussion of this phenomenon as it

relates to crack cocaine)—are often no more than symbolic gestures that allow politicians and others to claim they have "done something" about the problem that they might have had a hand in publicizing. When a drug scare or panic has occurred, it begs the question as to what "real" social problems the media are neglecting to cover.

### Scares over Synthetic Drugs, Including Methamphetamine

Over the last several decades, amphetamines, including methamphetamine, have been the focus of roughly a dozen different drug scares (Jenkins 1999: 29). Much less is known about the usage patterns of synthetic drugs such as meth than about drugs such as heroin and cocaine, "because most of the existing official measures are heavily weighted towards detecting problems in metropolitan areas rather than in suburban or rural areas or even in middling cities" (Jenkins 1999: 15). National data on drug prevalence that provide geographically disaggregated information focus on a relatively small number of select cities or large urban areas. For example, the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN), which deals with reports of drugs during hospital emergency room visits, collects information primarily from major urban areas. Another example is the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring data collection program (ADAM). Before it was discontinued in 2004 (Butterfield 2004a), ADAM examined, via interviews and drug tests, recent drug use among arrestees primarily in large urban jurisdictions. ADAM indicated wide geographic variation in arrestees' drug use (NIJ 1999: 11).

Since data sources such as DAWN and ADAM are collected primarily from urban areas, with very few exceptions (see Herz & Murray 2003), research on the local prevalence of drug use and abuse has been confined exclusively to major metropolitan areas (Jenkins 1999; Reinarman & Levine 1997b). Without reliable data on the prevalence of drug use and abuse in nonurban areas—systematically-collected information to which media constructions can be compared—rural communities are especially susceptible to drug scares. As Jenkins (1999: 15) put it, without such information, "it is all too easy to make shocking and unsubstantiated claims about [a drug's] explosive or epidemic growth."

Beginning in the late-1990s, coverage of meth by national print media outlets manifested a new scare over methamphetamine, typified by charged rhetoric from government officials, members of law enforcement and even journalists. For example, a front-page article in *USA Today*, "Meth: 'Drug of choice in Midwest,'" quoted then-Drug Czar Barry McCaffrey as calling meth "the crack of the '90s" (Howlett 1997). A front-page story in the *New York Times* made allusions to meth's addictiveness, evoking crack cocaine for emphasis: "[S]ome law enforcement officials are now comparing the problem to the crack cocaine epidemic in the nation's big cities in the 1980s. 'Meth makes crack look like child's play, both in terms of what it does to the body

and how hard it is to get off,' said Capt. Richard P. Nuzzo of the New York State Police" (Butterfield 2004b: A1). Another *New York Times* article, "Meth building its Hell's Kitchen in rural America," quoted the Sheriff of a rural county in Washington as saying, "We've got a meth plague" (Egan 2002). Similarly, a front-page story in *USA Today* carried the headline "'Meth' moves east... The criminal plague also brings an environmental nightmare" (Leinwand 2003). Perhaps no single piece of national print media was more significant in promoting a moral panic over meth than the August 8, 2005, issue of *Newsweek*. On its cover, superimposed on the photograph of a man smoking a clear-glass drug pipe, were the words, "The meth epidemic: Inside America's new drug crisis." In this issue, an article entitled "America's Most Dangerous Drug" discussed the specter of "a new generation of 'meth babies'" and quoted a deputy district attorney in Portland, Oregon, who said that meth "is an epidemic and a crisis unprecedented" (Jefferson 2005: 42-43).

In the midst of burgeoning national print media coverage of meth came a high-profile national television report. On February 14, 2006, the PBS newsmagazine *Frontline* aired a report called "The Meth Epidemic," which was produced in association with *The Oregonian*, Portland's daily newspaper (Byker 2005). In this broadcast, a reporter for *The Oregonian* stated that, "It's very hard to go to any part of Oregon and not experience the effects of methamphetamine on ordinary people. . . ." He also made an unsubstantiated prediction, saying "Oregonians know very well from experience what the East Coast can expect from this drug, and it's not a pretty picture."

In contrast to such media portrayals, national-level indicators of prevalence of meth showed no stark increases for the nation as a whole for the period of these reports (late 1990s - mid 2000s). Results from the federally-sponsored National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) indicated that prevalence of meth use among those aged twelve and older was essentially static from 1999 (when it began to inquire specifically about methamphetamine) through 2005. The NSDUH estimated that in 1999, 4.3% of those 12 and older had reported ever trying meth in their lifetime, a number that peaked at 5.3% in 2002 but was at 4.3% again in 2005. Similarly, those reporting using meth in the past year ranged from 0.5% to 0.7%; and those reporting using meth in the past month ranged from 0.2% to 0.3% in the same span (U.S. DHHS 2006a).

For the same period (1999-2005), meth use among high school seniors declined, according to results from the annual Monitoring the Future survey (Johnston et al. 2006). Whereas in 1999, 8.2% of high school seniors had reported trying meth in their lifetime, in 2005, 4.5% had. Similarly, in 1999, 4.7% of high school seniors reported using meth within the past year, compared to 2.5% in 2005; and while in 1999, 1.7% reported using meth within the last month, in 2005, this number was 0.9%. Both surveys' large differences

in lifetime versus "past month" use indicate a high rate of discontinuation of meth use, belying claims that using it a single time invariably results in a lifetime of addiction.

### Moral Panics

Moral panics are typified by "a situation in which public fears and state interventions greatly exceed the objective threat" posed by a phenomenon (McCorkle & Miethe 1998: 41). In a moral panic:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or . . . resorted to; the condition then disappears . . . or becomes more visible. (Cohen 2002: 1)

During a moral panic about drugs, the focus on the evils of an individual substance and/or the individuals who are associated with the substance encourages disregard for the social contextual circumstances that may underpin the phenomenon. The "evil" substance is portrayed, using disaster analogies, as a potential catalyst for societal collapse. As an illustration, Reinerman and Levine (1997a) pointed out that during the crack scare, myriad social problems (including unemployment, poverty, urban decay and crime) were spoken of and acted upon as if they were the result of the deviance or immorality or weakness of individual crack users. The most basic premise of social science—that individual choices are influenced by social circumstances—was rejected as left-wing ideology.

While past moral panics over drugs have commonly associated a racial or ethnic minority with a given substance (e.g., inner-city Blacks with crack cocaine) (Musto 1999; Reinerman & Levine 1997b), meth has been portrayed differently, as the drug of choice among lower-, working- and middle-class Whites living in rural areas (Wermuth 2000; Morgan & Beck 1997). The notion of deviance, such as widespread drug abuse, diffusing into the White middle class very well could be more disturbing than perceptions of drug abuse by an "out-group," such as racial minorities (McCorkle & Miethe 1998). As Cromer (2004: 392) put it, "[s]omething done by an out-group is simply condemned and fitted into the scheme of things, but in-group deviance is embarrassing, it threatens the norms of the group and tends to blur its boundaries with the out-group." Moral panics can "derive from the belief that crime and delinquency have permeated sections of the population hitherto considered to be unlikely or even unable to break the law." This view is consistent with Jenkins (1999: 27) who stated, "[m]ethamphetamine is viewed ominously as a redneck cocaine, a drug that threatens the White group with the lowest status, 'rednecks' and 'trailer trash,' who are already perilously near to sliding out of the privileged white racial

order." As an example of such a portrayal, a 1998 article in *Rolling Stone* magazine called meth "the white trash drug of choice" (Wilkinson 1998).

### Studying Moral Panics and Drug Scares

A characteristic of drug scares (Jenkins 1999; Reinerman & Levine 1997a) or moral panics over drugs (Cohen 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda 1994) is that media coverage of the drug in question is disproportionate to the direct and indirect harm that objectively can be attributed to it. Disproportionality has been defined as "an exaggeration of the number or strength of the cases, in terms of the damage caused, moral offensiveness, potential risk if ignored. Public concern is not directly proportionate to objective harm" (Cohen 2002: xxii). Waddington (1986: 246) states that, "The principal difficulty with . . . 'moral panics' is that of establishing the comparison between the scale of the problem and the scale of response to it." Cohen (2002: xxviii) acknowledges this concern, stating:

[T]he assumption of disproportionality is problematic. How can the exact gravity of the reaction and the condition be assessed and compared with each other? Are we talking about intensity, duration, extensiveness? Moreover, the argument goes, we have neither the quantitative, objective criteria to claim that R (the reaction) is "disproportionate" to A (the action) nor the universal moral criteria to judge that R is an "inappropriate" response to the moral gravity of A. . . . Empirically, though, there are surely many panics where the judgment of proportionality can and should be made—even when the object of evaluation is vocabulary and rhetorical style alone.

Regarding "rhetorical style," there are at least three dimensions to the claims made about a substance during a moral panic or drug scare. First, drug scares are characterized by claims about the rapid spread of a drug's use and abuse, which are not necessarily related to actual trends or patterns in drug use or trafficking. These claims, commonly employing alarming medical metaphors (including "epidemic" and "plague"), are used rhetorically to describe the growing prevalence of a drug problem.<sup>1</sup> Second, during a drug scare, worst-case experiences with the substance are framed as typical, "the episodic [is] rhetorically recrafted into the epidemic"—a phenomenon that has been referred to as "routinization of caricature" (Reinarman & Levine 1997b: 24). The final, related, dimension is the portrayal of the substance as being extremely addictive. As is the case with claims about the prevalence or spread of a drug, claims about its harm and addictiveness often are dubious. Furthermore, it is common for claimsmakers to evoke drugs that were the focus of past scares (e.g., crack) to lend credence to concern over a new scare (e.g., over methamphetamine).<sup>2</sup>

To conclude that concern about an issue constitutes a moral panic is not necessarily to deny that at least a kernel of a problem is at the root of the panic. Instead, it means "that the 'thing's' extent and significance [have] been

exaggerated" (Cohen 2002: viii). Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 43-44) proffered ways to detect disproportionality by examining the scope of media coverage of a drug, stating that the criterion of disproportionality has been met, "[i]f the attention that is paid to a specific condition is vastly greater than that paid to another, and the concrete threat or damage caused by the first is no greater than, or is less than, the second," or "[i]f the attention paid to a given condition at one point in time is vastly greater than that paid to it during a previous or later time without any corresponding increase in objective seriousness."

The present research examined the existence of disproportionality by looking at the prevalence of treatment admissions for meth relative to other illegal drugs, and comparing this information with media coverage. This comparison was made over time (1997-2005) and across three study sites. Examining multiple sites allowed for the comparison of the scope (i.e., the number of stories about meth, the proportion of stories on illicit drugs that focused on meth, the word count of stories) and nature (i.e., the extent to which the rhetoric of drug scares, such as medical metaphors, are used to describe meth) of media coverage relative to the "objective" problem.

### Research Questions

In light of this discussion, this study addressed the following four research questions:

1. How do newspapers serving three smaller Midwestern metropolitan areas portray—in terms of both number and content of articles—local problems with illicit drugs?
2. What is the nature and scope of drug abuse in three smaller Midwestern Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSAs), according to drug treatment admissions data?
3. How closely do newspaper accounts of methamphetamine correspond to prevalence, as measured by treatment admissions data and other indicators?
4. Are newspaper portrayals disproportionate to the objective threat presented by meth, thereby promoting a scare or moral panic?

Regarding the first two questions, multiple sites were examined because drug use, including method of ingestion, and abuse are localized problems; there is potentially great geographic variation in prevalence of use and abuse (Weisheit & Fuller 2004; Wermuth 2000; Jenkins 1999; Golub & Johnson 1997). A substance that is (perceived to be) a problem in an urban area potentially could have a low level of prevalence in a nearby rural area, and vice versa. Focusing on major urban Midwestern newspapers (such as the *Chicago Tribune*) would have been inadequate, because meth has been widely portrayed as a problem of the rural Midwest. By making comparisons across three less populous locales, this study was able to detect variations in coverage of meth, in terms of both the scope of coverage and the rhetoric employed, relative to the best available data disaggregated to the local level. This methodological approach also could

reveal whether a problem of substance misuse was seemingly being overlooked as a consequence of another being exaggerated (Manning 2006).

## DATA AND METHODS

### Newspaper Selection

This study focused on illicit drug coverage by three daily newspapers that serve the small capital cities of their respective Midwestern states: the *Bismarck* (North Dakota) *Tribune* (BT), the *State Journal-Register* of Springfield, Illinois (SSJR), and the *Capital-Journal* (TCJ) of Topeka, Kansas. These newspapers were selected for analysis based on: their availability in full-text format from the Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe database for the time period of this study (1997-2005), the size of the city they serve,<sup>3</sup> their geographic location (each city is located in a state with a large rural population), and whether there was information on the prevalence of meth addiction, according to treatment admissions data, in the area served by the paper for the time period of the study. That each of the cities served by these newspapers is a state capital could have implications for coverage of illicit drug-related issues, to the extent that these newspapers cover more thoroughly state legislative responses to perceived drug problems.

### Newspaper Article Search Criteria

A goal of this research was to compare newspaper coverage of methamphetamine to that of other illicit drugs. Towards that end, to identify newspaper articles for analysis, newspaper headlines were searched for dozens of terms associated with illicit drugs—both specific drugs (e.g., search terms for cocaine/crack included “cocaine,” “crack” and “coke”) and more general categories (e.g., club drugs, narcotics, hallucinogens, inhalants). To be as inclusive as possible, searches also focused on proscribed use of prescription drugs (e.g., OxyContin) as well as more than three dozen others falling under the categories tranquilizers, pain killers (analgesics), sedatives and stimulants.

### Newspaper Article Analysis Methodology

Searches using these criteria yielded 1,150 articles. AskSam data organization software was used to facilitate qualitative analyses and to create a database of articles' characteristics, which were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS 11.5 statistical software. Information on each article included: the newspaper in which it was printed, its publication date, its headline, the drug (if any) named in its headline, and its word count, among other characteristics. Analyses addressed both nature and the scope of newspapers' coverage of methamphetamine.

### Data on Prevalence

To examine trends in treatment admissions for methamphetamine, relative to admissions for other illicit drugs, this

study used the Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS) data for the years 1997-2005<sup>4</sup> (U.S. DHHS 2007). The TEDS data series is sponsored by the Office of Applied Studies at the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. It provides data on the number and characteristics of persons admitted to public and private substance abuse treatment programs receiving federal funding—about two thirds of all U.S. treatment for drug abuse (Stoil 1999: 6). TEDS data were valuable for purposes of this study because they are broken down geographically by Metropolitan Statistical Areas (MSA), including the MSAs that correspond to the nonurban geographic areas served by the three newspapers. Thus, information provided by TEDS served as a measure of a locality's substance abuse problem to which newspaper coverage could be compared.

TEDS data contain the variable “primary substance of abuse,” which includes methamphetamine as one of its nineteen categories. The way a treatment admission is defined may vary from state to state such that the absolute number of admissions is not a reliable indicator of the magnitude of treatment admissions in jurisdictions across states. For this reason, this study examined the *proportion*, rather than the number, of TEDS admissions for methamphetamine as opposed to another drug.

As is the case with all official data, TEDS has limitations. It consists of treatment admissions, and therefore may include multiple admissions for the same client. Any statistics derived from the data represent admissions, not clients. More notably, to some extent the number of treatment slots for the abuse of a given substance is contingent on government funding lines devoted to specific substances; this, in turn, affects to some degree the proportion of admissions for a given substance. Finally, a significant percentage of individuals are admitted for treatment for marijuana abuse primarily so that they can be diverted from jail, rather than because they have a serious problem with marijuana (Stoil 1999).

Despite these limitations, TEDS represents the only national-level information on the prevalence of substance abuse that is disaggregated for hundreds of MSAs. For the reasons just stated, TEDS data should not be construed as an unequivocal index of the prevalence of drug abuse. Yet for the three less-populous MSAs that are the focus of this study, it was the only available indicator of the prevalence of drug abuse to which media portrayals could be compared.

### Ancillary Data

This research also used two types of state-level data. First, data on meth lab “incidents”—defined as seizures of labs, dumpsites or chemical glassware—was available for 1999-2005 from the El Paso Intelligence Center (EPIC), a program of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA 2007). Second, household survey data estimated the percentage of residents aged 12 or older by state who had used meth in their lifetime, within the past year and within

**TABLE 1**  
**Drug Named among Articles Naming a Specific Substance in their Headline, by Newspaper:**  
**Number & Percentage, 1997-2005**

Drug Named	Bismarck Tribune	Springfield State Journal-Register	Topeka Capital-Journal	Total
Cocaine/crack	9 (5%)	66 (24%)	13 (8%)	88 (14%)
Marijuana	29 (15%)	44 (16%)	29 (17%)	102 (16%)
LSD	0	1 (<1%)	30 (18%)	31 (5%)
Methamphetamine	142 (75%)	137 (50%)	86 (52%)	365 (58%)
Other*	10 (5%)	26 (9%)	8 (5%)	44 (7%)
Total	190 (100%)	274 (100%)	166 (100%)	630 (100%)

\*Includes heroin, PCP, Ecstasy (MDMA), inhalants (e.g., nitrous oxide), prescription drugs (e.g., OxyContin), and the few headlines that named more than one drug.

**TABLE 2**  
**Number and Percentage of Articles Naming Methamphetamine in their Headlines, by Newspaper: 1997-2005**

Newspaper	Year								
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Bismarck Tribune	17 (81%)	11 (60%)	6 (60%)	13 (87%)	9 (75%)	29 (88%)	27 (71.1%)	18 (72%)	12 (71%)
Springfield State Journal-Register	2 (9%)	5 (18%)	14 (40%)	7 (35%)	17 (57%)	14 (52%)	20 (57.1%)	21 (91%)	37 (67%)
Topeka Capital-Journal		5 (36%)	10 (50%)	20 (56%)	25 (66%)	5 (71%)	7 (22.6%)	6 (67%)	8 (73%)
Total	19 (45%)	21 (34%)	30 (46%)	40 (56%)	51 (64%)	48 (72%)	54 (52%)	45 (79%)	57 (69%)

the past month. These data, pooled for the period 2002-2004, were from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) (U.S. DHHS 2006b).

## RESULTS

### The Scope of Newspaper Coverage (Quantitative Analysis)

Coverage of methamphetamine varied across newspapers and over time. Of the 1,150 articles on drugs in the sample for the span 1997-2005, the most appeared in the Springfield paper (495), followed by Bismarck (359) and Topeka (296). In each of the three newspapers, a slight majority of articles on drugs named a specific substance in their headlines. Table 1 gives a breakdown of the type of drug named by newspaper for the 630 headlines that named a specific drug. Across newspapers, methamphetamine predominated as the drug that most commonly appeared in headlines. In the *Bismarck Tribune*, three fourths of articles that named a specific drug named meth, whereas in Springfield and Topeka, roughly half named meth. As one might surmise from the handful of drug categories in Table 1 and the relatively small percentage of cases in the "other" category, many of the dozens of search terms entered for specific drugs yielded no "hits"; instead four drugs—cocaine/crack, marijuana, LSD, and methamphetamine—accounted for 93% of all articles in which a specific drug was named.

Table 1 illustrates stark differences in coverage of these substances across newspapers. For example, while in Springfield almost one in four article headlines dealt with

cocaine or crack, for the nine-year period the *Bismarck Tribune* had only nine stories (4.7%) with headlines on cocaine (none dealing with crack). As another example, 18.1% of the Topeka paper's headlines dealt with LSD, while there was only one LSD headline in the other two newspapers combined.

Given the predominance of articles referring to meth in their headlines, it is worthwhile to consider trends in the number and percentage of articles about methamphetamine across sites.

Table 2 provides the number and percentage of stories naming methamphetamine in their headlines among articles that specifically name any drug, by year and newspaper. It shows that the *Topeka Capital-Journal's* percentages fluctuated the most, with a substantial decline in 2002 due to heavy coverage of a particular case involving LSD. By comparison, the percentage of articles with meth in their headlines was consistently high in the *Bismarck Tribune*, while the *Springfield State Journal-Register* showed the most marked increase in number and percentage of stories on meth, from two (9.5%) in 1997 to 21 (91%) in 2004 and 37 (67%) in 2005. In sum, in all three newspapers, especially in the most recent five years (2001-2005), coverage of methamphetamine predominated relative to other illicit drugs. Note however that although a high percentage of the *Topeka Capital-Journal's* stories were about meth, its number of articles was low compared to the other two newspapers.

**TABLE 3**  
**Primary Substance of Abuse among Those Admitted for Treatment, by Metropolitan Statistical Area:**  
**Percentages, 1997-2005\***

Substance	Bismarck	Springfield	Topeka	Total
Cocaine/crack	2.1	33.1	40.6	25.3
Marijuana/hashish	65.5	49.6	28.9	48.0
Methamphetamine	23.4	5.1	24.5	17.7
Other**	9.0	12.2	6.0	9.1
Total	100	100	100	100

\*Excluding alcohol; for Bismarck, data were available for 1997-2002.

\*\*Consists of the balance of categories (15) of TEDS' "primary substance of abuse" variable, including heroin, "other opiates and synthetics," PCP, hallucinogens, "other amphetamines," and inhalants.

**TABLE 4**  
**Percentages of Treatment Admissions in which Methamphetamine was Identified as the**  
**Primary Substance of Abuse, by MSA and Nationwide: 1997-2005**

MSA	Year								
	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Bismarck	17.7	15.5	16.7	28.7	30.6	31.1			
Springfield	0	1.2	1.3	3.1	3.8	8.0	7.6	10.2	10.4
Topeka	23.3	19.9	19.1	20.5	23.3	22.5	23.3	32.0	36.8
Three-Site Mean	13.7	12.2	12.4	17.4	19.2	20.5	15.5	21.1	23.6

#### **Treatment Admissions for Methamphetamine Relative to Other Drugs**

This section presents the results of analyses of TEDS treatment admissions data for each of the three MSAs served by the newspapers, offering a profile of a locality's drug problem to which newspaper coverage could be compared. This research examined the percentage of TEDS admissions for which methamphetamine was identified as the primary substance of abuse. Since a focus of this study was jurisdictions' problems with meth relative to other illicit drugs, cases in which alcohol was coded as the primary substance of abuse were excluded.<sup>5</sup>

Table 3 shows great cross-site variation in the distribution of type of substance identified as the primary substance of abuse. Marijuana was most often identified as the primary substance of abuse in Bismarck (65.5% of all admissions) and Springfield (49.6%). In Topeka, cocaine/crack was the most commonly cited primary substance of abuse (40.6%), followed by marijuana (28.9%). In Bismarck, meth (24.5%) was the second most commonly cited primary substance of abuse after marijuana, while it represents the third highest percentage in both Springfield (5.1%) and Topeka (24.5%). In sum, there was variation in treatment admissions across sites, but in none was meth the primary substance of abuse.

There was also great within-MSA temporal variation in the proportion of TEDS admissions in which meth was the primary substance of abuse. Table 4 shows an upward trend for admissions for methamphetamine in Topeka; percentages

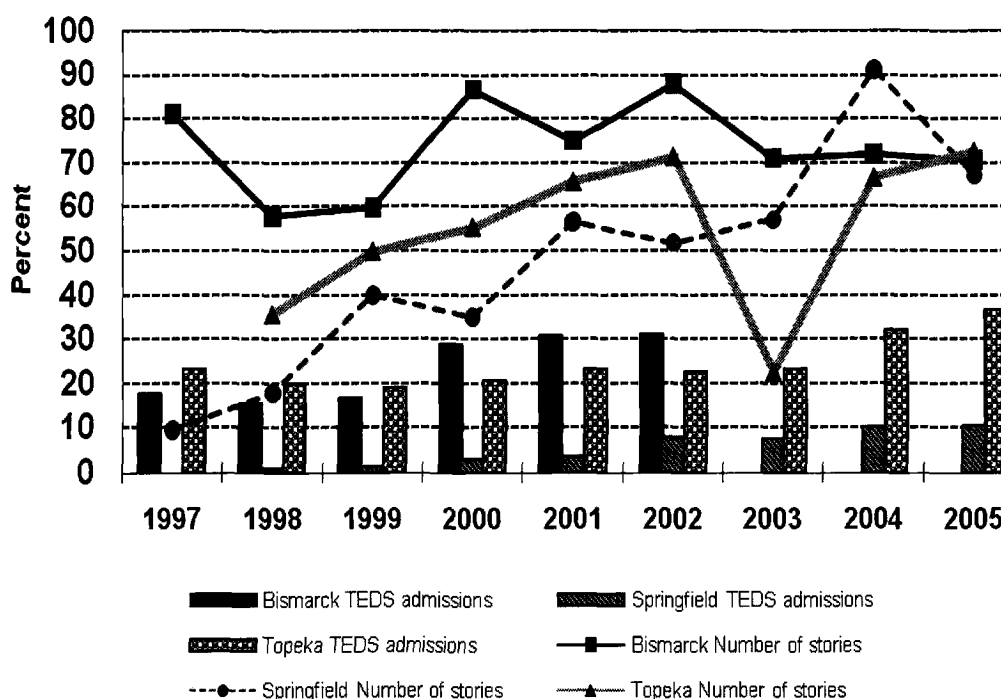
range from 19.9% to 23.3% from 1997-2003, then increase to around 33% in both 2004 and 2005. Similarly, in the initial three years of the study period, Bismarck's percentages hovered between 15% and 18%; in the latter three years for which TEDS data are available, its percentages of treatment admissions for meth increased markedly, peaking at 31.1% in 2002. Springfield was a different case, in that in 1997 there were no admissions in which meth was identified as the primary substance of abuse. The percentage rose to 1.2% in 1998 and peaked in 2004 at 10.4%—an eight-fold increase in eight years, but still low relative to the other two sites.

In sum, treatment admissions data indicated that the scope of the meth problem, relative to that presented by other illicit drugs, varied greatly across MSAs. While meth was not the most commonly identified primary substance of abuse in any of the three sites, it was among the three most common in each. In addition, temporal analyses revealed that in each jurisdiction, meth was more likely to be identified as the primary substance of abuse over time.

#### **Analyses of Supplemental State-Level Data**

I examined seven-year (1999-2005) trends in methamphetamine lab incidents (seizures of labs, dumpsites or chemical glassware) for each of the three states in which the sampled newspapers are located. There were sharp increases in the number of methamphetamine laboratories seized in both Illinois (from 124 in 1999 to 1,058 in 2004) and North Dakota (from 13 in 1999 to 252 in 2003). By comparison, the number of meth lab seizures in Kansas peaked in 2001

**FIGURE 1**  
**Methamphetamine as a Percentage of All Illicit Drugs, Newspaper Article**  
**Headlines vs. TEDS Admissions: Three Sites 1997-2005**



(at 852) and declined to 375 in 2005. There were large interstate differences in the number of methamphetamine lab seizures<sup>6</sup>, which were a function of variations in either the number of labs, law enforcement or recording practices, or both.<sup>7</sup>

Data from the NSDUH were pooled over three years (2002-2004) to achieve samples that were large enough to calculate state-specific estimates of drug use (U.S. DHHS 2006b). They reveal stark interstate differences in reported meth use among those aged twelve or older. For all three length-of-use periods—past month, past year, lifetime—the prevalence of meth use was lower than the overall national average in Illinois and higher than the overall percentages in North Dakota. If an addict is someone who has used a drug in the previous month—a commonly used, if overly broad, definition (Tierney 2005)—then North Dakota had the biggest problem with meth addiction: relative to the national average, twice as many North Dakotans reported using meth in the past month (0.6% compared to 0.3%) for this three-year period, while Kansas was at the national average and Illinois was markedly below it (0.1%). Regarding claims that meth is instantly and inevitably addictive, even in North Dakota, only 11% of those who had ever tried meth (0.6% of 5.6% who ever tried meth) would be considered addicts by this definition.<sup>8</sup>

#### Comparisons of Newspaper Portrayals with Indicators of Prevalence

This section juxtaposes the three newspapers' coverage of methamphetamine against the aforementioned indicators of meth use and abuse, as well as law enforcement activity against meth labs. The crux of this analysis focuses on the correlations between patterns of newspaper coverage and treatment admissions. Figure 1 contrasts the percentages of TEDS admissions where the primary substance of abuse was meth against the percentage of newspaper articles naming meth in their headlines. It shows that, irrespective of site, the newspaper portrayal percentages were markedly higher than the TEDS admissions percentages for most years. The difference between these percentages was not uniform across sites. Despite the *Bismarck Tribune's* high percentage of stories dealing with methamphetamine, it was only second among the three newspapers in terms of overrepresentation; for all years that the comparison could be made, in Bismarck the percentage of stories on methamphetamine was on average 3.4 times as high as the percentage of TEDS admissions for meth. The *Springfield State Journal-Register's* mean was almost four times as high, 12.6, while the *Topeka Capital-Journal's* mean was 2.3.

Pearson correlations show several strong positive relationships between the scope of newspaper coverage on meth



**TABLE 5**  
**Bivariate Pearson Correlations: By Site and Overall, 1997-2005**

Bivariate Relationship	Bismarck	Springfield	Topeka	Overall
Number of Articles on Meth and Percent of Articles on Meth	.506	.786*	.624	.513***
Number of Articles on Meth and Percent of TEDS Admissions for Meth	.441	.824***	-.235	.003
Percent of Articles on Meth and Percent of TEDS Admissions for Meth	.742*	.884***	.509	.568***
Raw Number of Articles on Meth and Number of Meth Lab Incidents in State	.814**	.741*	.382	.369

\*Statistically significant ( $p < .10$ ); \*\*significant ( $p < .05$ ); \*\*\*significant ( $p < .01$ ).

and indicators of meth's prevalence. Specifically, Table 5 shows that, for both Bismarck and Topeka, there were strong positive correlations between percent of articles on meth and percent of TEDS admissions for meth, and for the absolute number of articles on meth and the number of meth lab incidents in the city's state. Only in Topeka were there no significant correlations. Nonetheless, overall there existed a strong positive relationship ( $r = .568, p < .01$ ) between the percentage of articles on meth and the percentage of TEDS admissions for meth. Although the proportion of articles with meth in their headlines tended to be many times greater than the proportion of TEDS admissions for meth, it is apparent that across sites and over time these two numbers tended to vary in the same direction.

#### The Nature of Newspaper Coverage (Qualitative Analysis)

**Use of drug-scare rhetoric.** To varying degrees, each newspaper's articles on meth contained the rhetoric of drug scares (e.g., using terms such as "epidemic," "plague" and "scourge") to describe its prevalence and effects on individual users. The following excerpts serve as examples of the use of such metaphors in each newspaper, whether in quotes attributed to criminal justice, medical and drug-treatment practitioners, or phrases used by journalists. 'Right now, methamphetamine is the main drug that has pretty much swept across our state and across the United States,' said Special Agent Thomas Dahl of the North Dakota Bureau of Criminal Investigation. 'Now we've got people shooting this stuff into their veins in the parking lots of high schools.' . . . Annetta Sutton, director of the office for social concerns for the Diocese of Bismarck, said . . . 'We have an epidemic on our hands. We're losing kids as we speak.' (Hansel 2000: A1)

Illinois State Police say the number of ecstasy cases they handle has increased 35-fold in just the last five years, while the rate of increase in methamphetamine labs is more than twice that. . . . 'The drugs that have been epidemic in the past have been marijuana and cocaine, but ecstasy and meth have the force and velocity of something that could really hinder society. . . .' (Brown 2004: B16)

Kyle Smith [of the] Kansas Bureau of Investigation . . . told lawmakers [meth] remained a crucial problem in the state . . . "This is killing our children," Smith said. "It is maiming our children. . . . It is devastating this state. We're trying everything we can to fix it." (Anderson 2004 page NA)

**Claims regarding addictiveness.** Another of the characteristics of a drug scare is that the drug that is the subject of the scare is presented as being inevitably addicting. Methamphetamine is indeed highly addictive, both physically and psychologically. Also, in contrast to many illicit drugs (e.g., heroin, marijuana), the user does not typically need to "learn" to enjoy methamphetamine; it is instantly pleasurable (Weisheit & Fuller 2004: 136). With that said, the previously reported disjuncture between lifetime and "past month" prevalence of use (i.e., across drug surveys, a much higher percentage of respondents reporting lifetime use than past month use) demonstrates that a vast majority of those who had tried meth do not continue to use it. In contrast to this reality were dire statements about the highly addictive nature of meth (even compared to drugs such as crack cocaine), such as these:

"I think it might be the most serious law enforcement issue we've ever had," [the State Attorney General] said. . . . "Methamphetamine is so addictive, and it's so toxic, and it's so dangerous. This is something that is going to reverberate through every segment of society and on into the future if we don't get a handle on it." (Boldt 2003: A8)

"The problem with meth is that's very, very addictive." [Master Sgt. Bruce] Liebe [of the Illinois State Police] said "people who smoke methamphetamine can become addicted in six weeks. Those who ingest it can get hooked after just one use. In all the cases Liebe has investigated, only twice can he recall someone actually stopping meth use because of an arrest and then staying off the drug." (Antonacci 2000: 1)

[A drug treatment administrator said] "Meth is such a powerful addiction: . . . It's even more powerful than the addiction you see with crack cocaine." (Antonacci 2001: 1)

By contrast, the *Topeka Capital-Journal's* articles dealing with meth contained no similarly sensational claims about its addictiveness.

**Relationship between article content and length.** Hyperbolic statements concerning the addictiveness, spread and general harm caused by methamphetamine tended to appear in longer articles. The most prominent example of this phenomenon was a series of articles run by the *Bismarck Tribune* over a three-day period (May 28-30, 2000). The series consisted of three lengthy front-page articles ("Meth Now the Usual Suspect" [1,821 words], "Meth Called 'a Slow, Suicidal Death'" [1,745 words] and "Meth Picks up Pace in N.D.; As Crime Grows, Solutions to Stop Drug's Spread Must Be Found" [1,562 words]). The three feature articles were the third, fourth and sixth longest in the entire sample of 1,150.<sup>9</sup> The first article alluded to the problem's epidemic proportions:

[Assistant State's Attorney Rick] Volk and others familiar with meth see no end to the escalating trend of drug crimes and other crimes associated with meth use. . . . "I think it's simply going to increase. There doesn't seem to be any leveling off because of the addiction level." (Fehr 2000: A1)

It also presents some worst-case scenarios, manifesting "routinization of caricature" (presenting them as the norm):

Law officers and recovering meth addicts gave these examples [of behaviors exhibited while high on meth]: A Fargo man . . . set his home on fire to eliminate imagined police surveillance. He killed his mother in the fire. Another meth addict ripped the drywall off of the entire inside of his home and kicked in his television set. He was sure police had invaded his home through the sewer and installed listening devices in his walls and television set. Brian Erickstad said he used meth and other drugs the night that he and Robert Lawrence killed Barbara and Gordon Erickstad, his parents.

The second article in the series contained the following provocative statements: Minot psychiatrist John Garofalo "calls meth users 'victims and slaves' of their drug. . . . 'No one recovers from meth abuse,' Garofalo said." This series also contained multiple references to cocaine/crack. For example, "Meth now the Usual Suspect" contained the heading "Crack of the '90s." Twice in this series of articles, methamphetamine was referred to as "poor man's cocaine."

**Opinion pieces and editorials.** Opinion pieces and editorials on meth tended to echo the language of claimsmakers' quoted statements in news articles. Five of 22 opinion or editorial pieces on drugs dealt with meth, including an opinion piece by a local columnist entitled, "Meth Scourge is Exploding in our State" (Cates 2002: A4), which contained the following sensational passage:

I have known heroin addicts and they are tragic but often functional for years. I have known cocaine abusers who functioned for a time, spun out of control and sometimes gained

their equilibrium to survive and-or ended up in jail. Meth is different. It results in immediate, irreversible physiological damage with immediate devastating results. I saw a man spiral into hell in three months. This scourge is exploding in North Dakota. . . .

Three editorials on meth appeared in the *Springfield State Journal-Register*. This paper tended to use more alarming language toward the latter years of the observation period, as illustrated in this passage from an editorial entitled "Toughen laws to fight meth" (SSJR Editorial Board 2005: 8):

The emergence of methamphetamine as a virulent scourge throughout rural America is a testament to both the drug's deadly addictive nature and the wily determination of its addicts and manufacturers. . . . Just as heroin and cocaine have ravaged cities, so has methamphetamine become a plague in small towns and rural areas.

By comparison, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* mentioned meth in an opinion piece in passing only once. All three of its sampled editorials on drugs offered negative assessments of using the war metaphor to deal with drug problems, as their titles suggest: "Lots of People Praying That War on Drugs Never Ends" (2000), "Casualty List Continues to Grow under War on Drugs Strategy" (2000), and "State's 'War on Drugs' is a Misnamed Fantasy" (2001).

## DISCUSSION

Coverage of illicit drugs by these newspapers clearly varied in scope and nature, and in the degree of congruence with location-specific indicators of the extent of the meth problem. Analyses reveal a disjuncture between newspaper coverage of meth relative to other illicit drugs and the scale of the meth problem as indicated by site-specific treatment admissions data. There were clear variations across sites in terms of the disparity between the number of newspaper articles and treatment admissions. Nonetheless, there is a strong positive correlation across study years between the percent of articles on meth and the percent of treatment admissions for meth for two of the three sites, Bismarck and Springfield.

Does this disparity amount to "disproportionate" coverage? Unfortunately, it is impossible to ascertain whether the scope of coverage of meth is too great or too little at a given time or location (Baerveldt et al. 1998). Even if the treatment admissions data used herein were assumed to be the ideal indicator of a locality's drug problems, one would not expect a one-to-one ratio of newspaper coverage to treatment admissions. Meth arguably warrants more coverage than other illicit drugs because of its relatively powerful effects on individuals and communities. Further, a common definition of "news" is that which is out of the ordinary. To the extent that meth is a burgeoning crime problem, it could receive heavy coverage for this reason alone.

One also cannot discount the contribution of the home manufacture of meth to concern about its prevalence. The specter of the periodic discovery of a makeshift meth lab in a random quiet residential neighborhood seemingly heightens concern about meth in a manner that is distinct from that about other drugs (e.g., compared to the discovery of a handful of marijuana plants growing in a backyard). To the extent that "mom and pop" meth labs are discovered in residential neighborhoods and other places normally considered to be "safe"—potentially putting vulnerable populations, particularly children, in harm's way—this dimension of the meth story makes meth especially newsworthy (Katz 1987). Considered in this light, it is not surprising to see strong positive correlations between the number of articles on meth and meth lab incidents.

While a determination about what constitutes a disproportionate amount of newspaper coverage is inevitably subjective, it is feasible to ascertain where the nature of coverage of a drug falls on a continuum of rational to sensationalistic (Cohen 2002). It is relatively straightforward to examine the extent to which newspaper articles manifest the rhetoric of drug scares, including using alarming metaphors to describe a drug's prevalence, making exaggerated claims about its addictiveness and presenting worst experiences with it as typical.

Results of content analyses show that while articles in each of the three newspapers contained the rhetoric associated with drug scares, there were key differences across newspapers, especially in light of geographic variations in the meth problem as indicated by multiple sources. In Topeka, the disparity between newspaper coverage and treatment admissions was lowest, and the *Topeka Capital-Journal's* coverage of methamphetamine was the most reasoned and rational. In contrast, not only did the *Bismarck Tribune* have the highest percentage of articles on meth, but these articles—including especially feature-length articles and opinion pieces—contained more drug-scare rhetoric than either of the other two newspapers. That said, based on available indicators, Bismarck (and North Dakota) was facing the most severe meth problem. While its treatment admissions in which meth was identified as the primary substance of abuse were very similar to Topeka's, the percentage of residents of North Dakota who reported using meth within thirty days of being surveyed was much higher than that of Kansas and Illinois. North Dakota also had the highest number of meth lab incidents per capita.

By comparison, while the *Springfield Journal-Register's* increased coverage of meth coincided with its increased prevalence in terms of treatment admissions information, the prevalence of meth use in Illinois according to self-report survey data was a fraction of that in the other states. While the raw number of meth lab incidents was highest in Illinois, its per-capita value was by far the lowest. These available indicators suggest that Springfield's (and Illinois') problem

with meth paled in comparison to either of the other two sites'. Although overall the *Journal-Register's* stories on meth did not contain as many instances of drug scare rhetoric as the *Bismarck Tribune's*, hyperbolic statements about the prevalence and effects of meth appeared more frequently in Springfield in articles from the latter years studied. The scope and nature of the *Springfield Journal Register's* coverage of meth was the most conducive to spurring a scare over meth.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude that a community is in the grips of a moral panic is not necessarily to imply that the problem does not exist at all (Cohen 2002). Indeed, multiple studies found methamphetamine abuse to be a significant problem in the rural heartland (Weisheit & Fuller 2004; Rawson, Anglin & Ling 2002; Wermuth 2000; Morgan & Beck 1997). Research has suggested that to the extent that its distribution and use is increasing in rural America, it can be explained by structural factors, such as "economic disenfranchisement that is spreading across more varied working class communities. . . . The young, unskilled, marginalized and White working-class population, where methamphetamine is most entrenched, is rapidly increasing" (Morgan & Beck 1997: 159). In regard to substance abuse in general among rural populations, Warner and Leukefeld (2001) found that drug abusers from rural areas had more severe drug abuse problems than drug abusers from urban areas. They stated that the serious nature of rural drug problems should not come as a surprise given that, "many rural areas are addressing the same problems as inner city areas and are facing some of the same dynamics" (Davidson, as cited in Warner & Leukefeld 2001: 276). To the extent that meth abuse is a burgeoning issue in the rural Midwest, its emergence as a problem could be viewed as a consequence of other social maladies. This is in contrast to how a substance typically is portrayed during a scare or moral panic, when it is framed as the cause of social problems (Reinarman & Levine 1997a).

What might account for the variations in the scale and nature of newspaper coverage on meth documented here? Any answer to this question admittedly will be speculative. It seems that a combination of editorial discretion, along with the accuracy and reasonableness of the claims made to reporters in a locality, might explain much of the variation. Regarding editors' influence, Orcutt and Turner (1993) discuss how the decisions of a news magazine's editor played a major role in the distorted coverage of cocaine by major media outlets in the 1980s: "A large share of [the] early news magazine coverage came from a seven page cover story in the 17 March [1986] issue of Newsweek, 'Kids and Cocaine: An Epidemic Strikes Middle America.'" A reporter linked "this important, precedent-setting article to the concern of . . . the editor-in-chief of Newsweek about

the growing 'drug crisis' and his feeling of responsibility 'to put the drug problem in a larger context than we had in the past'" (Orcutt & Turner 1993: 192). The resultant scare about cocaine could be seen as a product of other major print and broadcast journalists adopting the theme of cocaine abuse as a national crisis (Fishman 2006).

Regarding the role of claims makers, it seems reasonable to conclude that some—be they members of law enforcement or the medical community, or government officials—will be more prone to frame the meth problem using the rhetoric of drug scares (i.e., making hyperbolic statements) than others. Even if methods of newsgathering are very similar across sites (e.g., individuals in similar roles are used as sources), differences in the use of hyperbole and metaphor among interviewees could account for some of the variation in the nature of coverage. Finally, one cannot discount the importance of the role that reporters play in "filtering" the claims of their sources; surely some reporters are more inclined to focus on the sensational than others. Thus, variation in reportage could also play a role in the cross-site differences.<sup>10</sup>

This research demonstrates the value of a focus on smaller cities' newspapers as opposed to major national media outlets, and the use of location-specific data as an indicator of geographic variation in the methamphetamine problem. Future research in this area would benefit from a careful examination of meth's portrayal in other forms of media (e.g., television) as well as other sources of data, which would allow for a fuller appraisal of the nature of drug use and abuse in rural areas. It would also benefit from ascertaining a measure of the public's concern over drugs, relative to other social issues, at the local level. Establishing whether media coverage of a drug is disproportionate to the "reality" of the problem it presents, and thus conducive to a moral panic, is a complex task. The question, "how much media coverage is too much?" is not easily answered.

## NOTES

1. Reinerman and Levine (2004: 187) observed that "the word 'epidemic' usually connotes a contagious disease that is spreading rapidly across all of society. The word 'plague' usually refers to the bubonic plague, a deadly bacterial disease that killed tens of millions of people in a few years during the Middle Ages. If these words are taken for what they mean in plain English, then the media claims that crack use was an epidemic or plague spreading across

society—pulling whomever it touched into the maw of addiction and death—were never accurate."

2. Past drug scares can serve as models for future ones. Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994: 142) observed: "The sudden burst of fear of LSD in the 1960s may have been a creature of the drug's novelty, the nature of its apparent threat, and the fabulous media circus afforded by its previously nonexistent widespread use. And, of course, American society's experience with past drug panics."

3. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Bismarck's population is 55,532 (Metropolitan Statistical Area [MSA] population, 94,719); Springfield's population is 111,454 (MSA population, 201,437); and Topeka's population is 122,377 (MSA population, 169,871).

4. Except for Bismarck, where TEDS information is available from 1997 through 2002.

5. For all three sites, alcohol predominated as the primary substance of abuse; it was the primary substance of abuse in approximately 60% of admissions in Bismarck, 40% of admissions in Springfield and half of all admissions in Topeka.

6. Controlling for population of the state, North Dakota has the highest number of meth lab incidents per capita, followed by Kansas and Illinois.

7. A major caveat of this information is that it gauges law enforcement response to the local production of methamphetamine rather than individual measures of abuse, use or even arrest or conviction.

8. By comparison, prevalence of use of marijuana and cocaine was many times higher in Illinois and Kansas. For the "past month" time span, 5.6% of all respondents in Illinois reported using marijuana and 1.1% reported using cocaine. In Kansas, 4.6% reported using marijuana and 0.5% reported using cocaine. Even in North Dakota, 4.7% reported using marijuana in the past month, about eight times as many as reported using meth; but, cocaine's prevalence (0.4%) was 33% lower than meth's (0.6%) (U.S. DHHS 2006a).

9. By comparison, the median word count for all articles was 279 in the Bismarck paper, 348 in Springfield and 367 in Topeka.

10. Additionally, one or more of the various models of newsworthiness could help to explain the variation in coverage. An overview of these is beyond this study's scope. For a comparison of some of these perspectives, Surette (1998) is a good source.

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