

# The Daily Dot

## How Grindr fuels crystal meth use

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There's a saying in Crystal Meth Anonymous: "If you're in the barber's seat, you're gonna get a haircut. But if you're not in the fucking barbershop, how are you gonna get a haircut?"

In the late '90s, Adam P., who told me about the saying, was doing what many other teens were doing: Going on AOL chatrooms to talk to his friends and, occasionally, flirting with boys. Adam, now 38, had just graduated from high school when he met a guy named Tim online. They met up and had sex a couple of times. One night, Tim introduced Adam to his friends who were doing crystal meth in an apartment in New York City. It was there that one question changed Adam's life for the next 20 years: "Do you want to smoke?"

Shortly after, Adam was having unprotected sex with a man when suddenly the man said, "Oh, by the way, I'm HIV-positive."

Adam's response, "Well, I guess I am now, too."

From 1999 to 2018, Adam struggled with his abuse of crystal meth. Adam tried to get clean more than once from the highly addictive stimulant, but he relapsed three times. He said that like many, his drug addiction was helped by gay dating apps including [Grindr](#), [Scruff](#), and [Jack'd](#).

The problem of drug-dealing online isn't a new concept. It persisted in the 1990s and the early 2000s on AOL chatrooms, then transitioned to popular gay social websites like [Manhunt](#) and [Adam4Adam](#), which operate similarly to modern apps. Today, users on [Grindr](#), [Scruff](#), and [Jack'd](#) are prominently promoting the buying, selling, and using of drugs—commonly crystal meth.

The popular gay dating apps are geolocation-based, which structurally sets them apart from swipe-centered apps like [Tinder](#), [Bumble](#), and [Hinge](#). The geolocation, visualized on a grid-like interface that features more than 100 profiles at once, makes it easy to see the users nearest you. For dealers, it's the perfect way to scope out potential customers.

In their profiles, users add unnecessary capital Ts—e.g., "HosTing"—or use codewords like "Tina," "Crystal," diamond emoji, and "Party and Play" or "PNP" to signify they use or deal crystal meth. The availability of the drugs on the apps makes recovery harder for those battling with substance abuse disorder, especially for those dealing with an addiction to crystal meth, which is recognized by the [American Addiction Centers](#) as one of the five most addictive drugs.

Party drugs have long been popular in nightlife spaces. [Studio 54](#) gained popularity in the late '70s. Parties there were extravagant, and drugs were used en masse. The festivities were attended

by gay men and the occasional drag queen. Owner Steve Rubell was a gay man, and he welcomed these outsiders into the predominantly straight scene. When Studio 54 closed down in 1980, the queer community began communing in spaces specifically for them. The Anvil and the Saint were two New York gay bars that operated in this decade's peak.

In the '80s, the drug of choice was crack cocaine. According to the [National Rehabs Directory](#), "The first large-scale use, and presumably mass production [of crack cocaine], was observed in 1984 in Los Angeles."

Crystal meth became more widely used among the queer community in the '90s. The odorless drug is relatively cheap and has stayed consistently at about \$20 for a quarter of a gram since the '90s. It's most commonly smoked, but it can also be injected, giving the user a much more immediate high. Either way, the high lasts for about 12 hours. Euphoria, an inflated sense of self-confidence, and increased sexual drive wash over the user. It activates the same pleasure center in the brain that's triggered during sex.

It wasn't until 2002 that crystal meth became seen as a health risk in the queer community. That year, Gay Men's Health Crisis and the LGBT Center plastered ads emblazoned with the words, "Buy Crystal Meth, get HIV for free" in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood. But the ads were directed toward the neighborhood's saturated population of white gay men, and the organizations failed to target other communities where crystal meth use was rampant.

While crystal meth usage has decreased among all communities since 2004, a [data set](#) provided by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene shows in 2017, 12% of Black and Latino men used crystal meth, compared to 6% of their white counterparts.

Connecting the use of crystal meth to the rise in diagnosis in HIV is not entirely incorrect. A lot of what is taught about HIV infection through drug use involves the sharing of unsterile needles, leading to transmission. But crystal meth is different. When people use crystal meth together for sexual pleasure, inhibitions fly out of the window; often, that means having unprotected sex. [The Centers for Disease Control confirms](#) that "meth users that reported more sex partners, were less likely to report condom use." Crystal meth users aren't sharing needles as often as they used to because of HIV prevention campaigns, but they are still at risk of contracting the virus through intercourse.

For addicts who use Grindr and other gay dating apps, unsafe sex and drug use often go hand-in-hand.

Christopher P., a 34-year-old from Oregon, was also introduced to crystal meth by a man he was hooking up with.

Christopher said when he was 14, his adoptive mother found out he was gay and kicked him out of the house. He was homeless until he met Randy, who agreed to take care of him. Through Randy, he met Rick, who lived close by and would sometimes pick up Christopher from school.

Christopher said that one day after school, Rick pulled out a light bulb-looking contraption and began to smoke from it. When Christopher asked what it was, Rick responded, "I don't ever want you touching this stuff, it has ruined my life for the past 20 years." Christopher respected

Rick and valued his opinions, and Rick showed him caring love in a new way. But seeing what this drug did to Rick and how it increased his performance sexually, Christopher thought, “I want that, too.”

When he tried crystal meth for the first time, he snorted it. It was terrible, and he hated every second. But then he tried smoking it instead. After that first exhale, everything changed. His shoulders rolled back, his chest sat higher, and all of the voices that made him feel ashamed of who he was seemed vanish. For the first time, he felt attractive.

Christopher described sex on crystal meth as “electric.” He said, “All my senses were heightened, especially touch, and I just loved every minute of it.”

His use increased, and he eventually began to sell drugs. In 2006, he moved to London and ran an operation with a man he met online. They sold drugs—including cocaine, counterfeit cigarettes, MDMA, Ketamine, Viagra, and crystal meth—until one member of their cohort got caught and threatened to name them to the police, prompting Christopher to move back to the U.S.

A few years later, Christopher went on Grindr to look for other sexual prospects and met a man who taught him how to sell crystal meth on dating apps.

Christopher would strike up conversations on the app, and if it happened to come up that a person was looking for drugs, he would tell them that he could hook them up.

For three weeks, I attended Crystal Meth Anonymous meetings held at the LGBT Center in New York City. After climbing up a black metal spiral staircase, I would walk down a hallway lined with promotional posters for the center, then up another set of cement stairs to Room 214. Every Friday, the center holds a meeting called Crystal Clear Beginnings. Everyone is welcome.

In the meeting space, the metal folding chairs are beige, the walls are beige, and the hardwood floors that reflect light off a thick coat of polyurethane are beige. Attendees sat facing the meeting’s leaders and featured speaker. Posters listing the 12 Steps and the 12 Traditions of Crystal Meth Anonymous are pinned on the wall. About 50 people, almost all of them men, would pile into the room, excitedly greet their friends, catch up, and then settle down for the meeting.

The meetings start the same way as many addict support meetings do: The leader for the meeting introduces themselves with “Hi my name is (BLANK) and I’m a crystal meth addict. Then the crowd responds, “Hi (BLANK).” The leader asks for everyone to join them in reciting the serenity prayer, which is when the crowd says in unison, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

At the second meeting I attended, a man in his early 30s addressed the crowd. “I’m shaking right now. Ugh, I don’t know why,” he said. His frustration radiated as he projected his voice. “I went back on Grindr, and I just had to close it as soon as I opened it because I saw some people I used to use with. Once I closed it, I told my friends and they said, ‘You better get your ass to a

meeting,' so here I am." He shook his hands to rid himself of nerves and sat down as people applauded.

There were men of all ages, some that have been sober for 10 years, others that have been sober for 10 hours. In the three consecutive meetings I went to, there were only two women who attended. There were mostly white men, but many were brown and Black, and a few were Asian. At my third meeting, there was a white attendee with blond hair and blue eyes who seemed like he just came from the gym, his compression shirt stained with sweat and hair slightly out of place. A Latino couple walked in holding hands and didn't disconnect for the entire meeting. Almost every man who spoke mentioned being HIV-positive.

The number of overdose deaths due to crystal meth is disproportionately smaller in comparison to the overall deaths due to opioid abuse, making it increasingly harder to convince government officials to allocate funds and resources to eradicating the problem.

But in recent years, the community has seen a rise in deaths related to meth overdoses. There were 18 overdose deaths in New York City reported in 2016; that number increased to 64 deaths in 2017 and 66 in 2018. Men of color are particularly at risk: The Kaiser Family Foundation reported in 2019 that "Annual new [HIV] infections among gay and bisexual men overall and among Black gay and bisexual men have remained stable in recent years. However, there have been increases among certain groups of gay and bisexual men, including Latinos and young males 25-34."

In 1996, Congress passed the first law to slow the consumption of meth with the Comprehensive Methamphetamine Control Act. With this new law, "legislation required that individuals buying and selling chemicals used in meth production register with the federal government, which sought to track such chemicals and reduce their supply to manufacturers," according to the Cato Institute, a political thinktank. The federal government tried to further regulate the methamphetamine with the Combat Methamphetamine Epidemic Act of 2005.

Since these two laws have been passed, states have been left to battle the crisis on their own. Most recently, South Dakota made headlines with its tagline, "Meth. We're on it."

The lack of government intervention is only part of the problem. Dating apps are enabling users by letting illegal activities persist on their platforms. A study conducted in Thailand in 2017 found that gay dating apps "significantly increased motivational substance use through messaging from their counterparts." One author of the same study found that less frequent use of gay dating apps "resulted in less exposure to drugs."

But dating apps are protected by the government. In 1996, Congress passed the Communications Decency Act, which states, "No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."

While they aren't liable for what happens, dating apps could flag accounts and detect codewords affiliated with selling drugs. David Fleet, a computer science professor at the University of Toronto, told NBC News that, "If you know what the drugs are called, and you program words into the algorithm, like 'crystal meth' for example, it is very simple to detect those words."

He added, “If the dating apps use modern machine-learning tools, not only can they censor pre-programmed words, but they could also detect other words that are essentially used as synonyms for various, more covert terms for drugs.” Essentially, Grindr can be doing something—but won’t.

Grindr, Scruff, and Jack’d did not respond to the Daily Dot’s requests for comment.

Grindr has been going through a bigger PR nightmare that has taken the app’s focus away from the mounting drug problem. In 2016, founder and former CEO, Joel Simkhai sold the social network to a Chinese gaming company called Kunlun Group, relinquishing his title as CEO, and the position was filled by the current president, Scott Chen. Since taking over, Scott has created PR disaster after PR disaster for the app. The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States has declared that the acquisition by Kunlun Group is a threat to national security, forcing it to put the company up for sale. June is Kunlun Group’s self-imposed deadline to sell the company.

But Chen isn’t having an easy time trying to sell the app to venture capitalists. As BuzzFeed News reports, “Faced with explaining a 10-year-old app’s potential for growth, Chen chose to focus on the company’s hookup past rather than a three-pronged pitch around the main app, Into, and Grindr for Equality that showed Grindr could be a one-stop shop for ‘everything gay.’” Couple this with a drug-selling problem on the app, and the company has a lot on its plate.

The first time Christopher tried to get sober was 2012.

Every time he went out and used, it was raining. Every. Single. Time. When he went out to use, he would always walk home so his husband wouldn’t ask about cab charges on their shared debit card.

On a rainy Saturday in October, the sun was coming up as Christopher was walking home from a night of using. He called his best friend and said, “I’m ready to go to rehab.”

That Monday, he went to a psychiatric facility in New Jersey for the first time. But then Hurricane Sandy hit, and he was sent home. Days later, Christopher finally found a new facility close to his apartment in New York that could take him.

Christopher said during his time as an out-patient at the new rehab center, he was there almost every day. “I love to be loved talking about my feelings, I love being able to define my feelings,” he said. “Being able to articulate what I was actually feeling was like, super empowering for me and like, I’d never had language like that before.”

He had a relapse, and center officials suggested he try a 12-step program. But he was apprehensive and decided not to go. “That sounds like a fucking cult,” he said.

He said, “In the program we always say, ‘You pay for the suggestions that you don’t take. All the suggestions are free. But you have to pay for the ones you don’t take. And I paid.’”

After he got out of rehab, Christopher booked a dancing job in Oregon. He and his husband drove cross-country and stayed with Christopher’s mother. But when they got there, he noticed that she seemed off. She told him that she had a rare blood cancer with no cure.

Taking his mom to chemotherapy became part of Christopher's routine. He woke up at 6am, got his mother dressed and ready for chemo, and went to rehearsal. For weeks, he did the same thing over and over again. After a while, he felt like he needed an escape. So he opened Grindr to find crystal meth and got high.

It was the start of a two-year relapse.

"I just couldn't deal with my mother's mortality," he says. "I was just running from that thought for so, so, so long, I just couldn't do it."

But in 2015, on his 30th birthday, he decided to do things differently. He set out to get sober, and by staying off Grindr, he stayed sober.

His mother passed away on Jan. 28, 2018. Because he was sober, he was able to be present for that moment.

"That was such a gift," he said. "I'm so grateful for the life that I have today and all the things that I have been able to accomplish. Not even like the bigger like cash and prizes that people talk about. Just hit the small subtle things like the change in myself worth. That has been the biggest gift for me and that's not something I will *ever* give up."

Adam's longest binge lasted 13 days.

In 2010, he moved in with his then-boyfriend in New Jersey, worked at Whole Foods, and helped care for his sick father. He would leave work at 11pm, and in the six-hour window before his dad's doctor appointment, Adam would drive to his dealer in New York City, "fuck around with" whoever he wanted to, get high, drive home, sober up, and take care of his father.

But on Valentine's Day 2011, things didn't go as planned.

He stopped by his dealer's place and then drove to the Upper West Side to meet up with his old friend Tim. He left his car in a parking garage, went to get high, and stayed in Tim's apartment for four days. He left only to hook up with a couple that he knew, walking 50 blocks to their apartment to avoid taking the train while high.

When he was ready to go home, his car had been in the garage for 13 days, and he couldn't afford to get it out. He had to find another way back to New Jersey, so he went to the bus station and tried to get a ticket, but he was too high. He gave a homeless man \$10 to buy him a ticket, and he got on what he thought was the right bus.

He remembers being woken up by the bus driver when they pulled into the depot, knowing only he was somewhere in New Jersey. It took a four-mile walk to another bus station and a \$5 bus ticket to finally get home.

The next morning, Adam was sitting on his couch when his brother and sister-in-law stopped by. They told him that if he didn't make changes in his life, they didn't want anything to do with him.

He contacted a friend who had mentioned Crystal Meth Anonymous to him, but since he lived in Jersey, he was reluctant to go into the city. His friend picked him up and brought him to his first

meeting. "I fucking hated it. I couldn't sit still, I was so nervous," Adam said. But he stuck with it and went back two more times that week.

He continued to work the program until it worked for him. He relapsed once in 2015 after chatting with a man on Grindr he didn't know but used with. "I shot up, and the last thing I remember was waking up three days later," Adam said.

"Maybe it's age or I just did so much shit," he said. "I did a lot of drugs and wound up shooting up like four times in one day. When I came home, I tried to hang myself in the bathroom. Was almost successful, too. I had made a rope for myself out of bed sheets that I tore up and they broke."

When Adam was using, he said, he didn't care about his mortality. He did whatever he wanted and only cared about being high. But now, he's taking control of his decisions.

Adam is still on Grindr but said that he doesn't feel tempted to use drugs anymore because he's past that part of his life. He knows he's still in the barbershop, but he doesn't plan on getting a haircut anytime soon.