

Newsweek

Mexican Cartels Try to Create a Market for Meth in New York City

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Law enforcement agencies have long wondered why methamphetamine, which ravaged so many American communities from the 1990s until the mid-2000s, didn't take hold in New York City.

Because the New York City metropolitan area is the largest illegal drug market in the country, and because demand has been so high elsewhere in the U.S., the city's law enforcement for decades "has always been anticipating a meth outbreak," explains James Hunt, special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration's New York Division.

"We've just never seen it take off to the same degree," Hunt tells *Newsweek*.

Heroin, cocaine and marijuana remain the mainstays of the city's illicit drug economy, while meth has stayed on the fringes of the club scene.

When there have been arrests for distribution of meth, they have mainly peaked at one or several pounds, and often occur in the city's West Village neighborhood, officials say. Moreover, the rate at which meth has flowed into the city has been more of a trickle than a steady stream, given that it's historically arrived in small quantities through the mail or occasionally via individuals traveling from the West Coast on airplanes.

So it was notable that authorities earlier this month collared near the Holland Tunnel a driver who, they allege, had 25 kilos of meth in his trunk. Officials believe the meth to be of Mexican origin, they tell *Newsweek*. Of course, one big bust does not a trend make, let alone serve as evidence of a potential drug "epidemic."

It's worth pointing out, though, that the Drug Enforcement Administration's (DEA) meth seizures in New York have surged since fiscal year 2012. The DEA seized six kilos that year, but the total shot up to 44, 55 and 66 kilos in fiscal 2013, 2014 and 2015, respectively. And high-quantity busts, once scant, have picked up in this same period.

As in the rest of the U.S., New York's meth now mostly hails from Mexican cartels, and the confiscated product isn't like the trailer-based crank of yore. These cartels' super-lab production model (yes, like in *Breaking Bad*) turns out meth that's incredibly pure: in the mid- to high 90 percent range. Meanwhile clandestine, or "clan," labs in upstate New York produce meth that's 60 percent to 75 percent pure.

The Mexican cartels traffic the powerful stimulant on the same routes they use to transport heroin and cocaine from Central and South America into the U.S., with tractor-trailers and individual vehicles traversing official border crossings. Mexican cartels started gaining ground in the U.S. market in the mid-2000s. One factor contributing to the cartels' rise was a U.S. law limiting access to pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient of meth.

In addition, law enforcement agencies intensified their crackdown on mom-and-pop operations, further contributing to this shift away from domestic production. Many cartels are involved, but the Sinaloa cartel, widely considered to be one of the most violent drug organizations, dominates the trade.

"They're basically flooding the market," Hunt says. "They're sending more meth here, probably more than the market demands right now, but they're trying to create a market." He adds, "They want a big addict population."

Bridget Brennan, New York City's special narcotics prosecutor, tells *Newsweek* that seizures of Mexican-distributed heroin have overtaken those of Colombian-distributed heroin. This shift has also been visible in the meth trade here: Authorities recently started seeing Mexican meth alongside heroin in local drug takedowns, she says.

"It would lead you to believe that the Mexican cartel is diversifying its product line and trying to cultivate a new user group," Brennan says, explaining that the target customers include not only New Yorkers but also other Northeasterners who could see greater access to the drug due to their proximity to the transportation hub.

One might wonder whether this is a good business move for the Mexican cartels, considering that recreational drug users in New York City have historically been underwhelmed by the product.

A glut of meth in the drug marketplace, coupled with waning demand, could result in a lot of very cheap product on the street. Hunt notes that such market conditions could allow potential users to try it without taking much of a financial hit, with some perhaps even being enticed by free samples. If they develop an appetite for meth or an addiction, and if the user base grows due to these financial incentives, the cartels could get a hefty return on investment. Because it's so cheap to make, failure to establish a market here wouldn't be too harmful to their bottom line.

However, there are some very important caveats in this drug economy scenario. Because the drug market is illegal, there isn't much data about supply or demand. In other words, nobody knows for sure how many drugs are out there, how many people do them or to what extent.

Jeffrey Miron, a senior lecturer in economics at Harvard and senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#), tells *Newsweek* the lack of data largely stems from problems in reporting. Population-wide estimates based on self-reporting might skew low due to cultural taboos, or high if a drug attracts a lot of media attention. Emergency room visits and overdose deaths also don't paint a perfectly accurate picture, given that this information is also dependent on the accuracy of those who report it.

Miron says one should be very careful in calling alleged upswings in drug use "epidemics," arguing that the overall use of these substances remains relatively static in a population.

"I certainly don't mean to say that there's no fluctuation in drug use—just as with any other good, there can be certainly be fluctuations in use," he says. "But over time, there doesn't seem to be radical variations."

Javier Osorio, an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, says law enforcement efforts also have an impact on reporting, and thus the perceived breadth of the drug market.

"The number of drugs seized or confiscated depends on two things: the flow of drugs and how stringent are security procedures," he says.

The war on drugs, Osorio says, can be compared to fishing. Intensifying the anti-drug efforts is akin to casting a wider net, so it would stand to reason that officials take more drugs into custody.

"That does not necessarily mean more drugs are floating," he says. "It doesn't mean there are more fish under the water."

Officials also posit that New Yorkers might be too snooty for meth, which would undermine growth in the user base.

"When we've talked to people who are involved in rehab treatment and all that, or users of other drugs, there is a stigma attached to meth use among New Yorkers," Brennan says. Many city dwellers think that it's for "people in the trailers or out in hillbilly country or whatever" and that they're "too sophisticated" for meth, she says, paraphrasing their comments.

"They don't view it as a 'New York' drug," she adds.

And Brennan is just fine with that haughtiness—or "wisdom," as she puts it—if it keeps meth from developing a cachet.

"That's OK with me," she says. "Whatever works."