

Success of anti-meth ads questioned by study

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An independent review investigating the effectiveness of a publicly funded graphic anti-methamphetamine advertising campaign has found that the campaign has been associated with many negative outcomes. The review was published in the December issue of *Prevention Science*, a peer reviewed journal of the Society for Prevention Research (SPR).

The Montana Meth Project (MMP) was created in 2005 to reduce methamphetamine use in Montana via graphic advertising showing extreme consequences of using meth "just once." Initially the ad campaign was privately funded, but it has since received millions of dollars in state and federal support as the MMP has promoted the ad campaign as a resounding success to policy makers and the media. Based on the apparent success of the ad campaign in Montana, it has since been implemented in other states including Arizona, Idaho, and Illinois, with more states to follow.

The negative outcomes identified in the review include: following six months exposure to the MMP's graphic ads, there was a threefold increase in the percentage of teenagers who reported that using meth is not a risky behaviour; teenagers were four times more likely to strongly approve of regular meth use; teenagers were more likely to report that taking heroin and cocaine is not risky; and up to 50% of teenagers reported that the graphic ads exaggerate the risks of using meth.

The review found that the MMP overlooked these unflattering results when promoting their research findings to policymakers and the media. Instead, the MMP focused on select positive findings.

The author of the review, David Erceg-Hurn, who is currently completing his PhD in Clinical Psychology at the University of Western Australia, came across the Meth Project while conducting research on graphic tobacco advertising. There was a mention of the Meth Project in an article he read. Erceg-Hurn followed up on that mention and closely scrutinized the Meth Project's research reports. He said that it is important for organizations that are funding or considering funding the MMP's ad campaign to be made aware of all of the MMP's findings - positive and negative. To date, this has not happened.

Erceg-Hurn also criticized claims that the ad campaign has been responsible for reducing meth use in Montana. "Meth use had been declining for at least six years before the ad campaign commenced, which suggests that factors other than the graphic ads cause reductions in meth use. Another issue is that the launch of the ad campaign coincided with restrictions on the sale of cold and flu medicines commonly used in the production of meth. This means that drug use could be declining due to decreased production of meth, rather than being the result of the ad campaign."

Erceg-Hurn also pointed out in his review that due to the way the MMP has conducted their research, it is impossible to conclude that the ad campaign had any effect on meth use. To draw such conclusions would require much more rigorous research. This would involve examining two groups of teenagers that were equivalent in terms of drug use, exposing only one group to the graphic ads, and then examining any differences between the groups in their drug use.

The theory underlying the MMP's ad campaign was also criticized by Erceg-Hurn. "The idea behind the ad campaign is that teenagers take meth because they believe it is socially acceptable, and not risky - and the ads are meant to alter these perceptions. However, this theory is flawed because the Meth Project's own data shows that 98% of teenagers

strongly disapproved of meth use and 97% thought using meth was risky before the campaign started."

The review also points out that considerable prior research has found that large anti-drug advertising campaigns can be ineffective and sometimes harmful. For example, the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign has cost taxpayers over \$1.5 billion since 1998. A Government Accountability Office report found that the ad campaign has not reduced drug use. The only significant results were in an unfavorable direction - some youths reported an increase in marijuana use upon increased exposure to the campaign.

Erceg-Hurn concluded in his Prevention Science review that based on current evidence, continued public funding and rollout of Montana-style anti-methamphetamine graphic ad campaign programs is inadvisable.

Source: Society for Prevention Research

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