

Meth users turning to identity theft to pay for their habit

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RIVERSIDE – Stealing mail. Digging through trash. Days spent in front of a computer trying to unlock financial information.

All to score methamphetamine.

Authorities are discovering that more and more desperate users of the drug are turning to identity theft to pay for their habit, creating a criminal nexus costing Americans millions of dollars.

The trend is sweeping the West and spreading to other parts of the country, with one hub of activity in the garages and trailer parks of Riverside and San Bernardino counties on the fringe of suburban Los Angeles.

The region was the site of a third of California's nearly 500 meth lab busts in 2004 and is home to the second-highest number of identity theft victims in the nation.

"It's been said the two crimes go together like rats and garbage," said Jack Lucky, a Riverside County prosecutor who nearly became a victim of identity theft himself before his personal information was found at a meth lab.

"It's a pervasive problem," he said.

The connection is posing a major challenge for authorities, who until recently tended to overlook or neglect identity theft evidence at meth labs in favor of pursuing drug charges that are easier to prove and carry stiffer penalties.

"We weren't educated or sophisticated enough to spot what they were doing," said Riverside County sheriff's Sgt. Steve Koller, a narcotics task force member. "It's taken us a while to catch up."

U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., has called on the Department of Justice to study the link further and recommend tougher penalties for those convicted of both crimes.

"What we are probably going to find is that there is a stronger connection than we know right now," she said.

No figures were available on just how much the link is costing consumers. Separately, however, meth use and identity theft have taken a toll.

Nearly 10 million Americans fell victim last year to identity theft, costing \$5 billion. Meanwhile, the popularity of methamphetamine has grown, with an estimated 12 million people trying it at least once.

Police said meth users – known as "cranksters" – are drawn to identity theft because they can stay up for days scanning computer records or go "Dumpster diving" for discarded financial information.

A drug dealer recently provided fake identities to a woman in Phoenix who allegedly used them to buy cell phones. She was paid with methamphetamine, and the phones were later used by some of the dealer's associates, authorities said.

Last summer, Georgia authorities tracked at least 20 thieves – known as the "Mailbox Meth Gang" – who cruised housing

subdivisions looking for raised flags on mailboxes that could yield checks and bank statements to exchange for meth. Investigators found 14,000 credit card numbers in a laptop computer seized from the gang.

Police said the thieves don't target one spot too long and often split the work.

"There is the collector who steals your identity from mailboxes or trash bins," said Alameda police Sgt. Anthony Munoz, who teaches a class about the connection for the California Narcotics Officers Association. "Then there is the converter, who turns your identity into something, and lastly there is the passer, the person who uses the fraudulent identity."

Munoz said as many as 85 percent of the identity theft cases he investigates have meth connections. In one, a defendant pleaded guilty to 56 counts of identity theft and was sentenced to just one year in county jail, he said.

"Those are the type of sentences you get," said Munoz, who backs sentencing enhancements for people convicted of both crimes.

Penalties for identity theft vary from state to state. In California, where legislators are trying to strengthen the laws, identity thieves can face up to three years in prison and a fine up to \$10,000.

A conviction in Arizona also carries up to three years in prison, but fines can reach \$150,000. First-time offenders, however, often receive probation.

The situation has emboldened many meth users.

"We don't have the significant sentences right now that would deter some of these individuals," Riverside County District Attorney Grover Trask said. "It's easy money."

Trask said 60 percent of the identity theft cases handled by his office are drug-related. He has created a three-investigator unit to make sure identity theft charges are pursued.

In Arizona, the connection is so prevalent that Attorney General Terry Goddard now sends an investigator with identity theft expertise to meth lab busts.

Lucky, the Riverside County prosecutor, didn't realize personal information had been stolen from his mailbox until a caller said there had been fraudulent activity linked to his credit card.

Lucky got suspicious when the caller requested his Social Security number. When he asked for a supervisor, he was given a toll-free number that was no longer in service.

Identity thieves later applied for credit in his name. The prosecutor didn't discover where his identity had ended up until he got a call from a sheriff's deputy.

"I guess we weren't really surprised they found it at a meth lab," Lucky said.

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