**Methamphetamine Discourse:**

*Media, Law, and Policy*

Susan Boyd & Connie I. Carter

*University of Victoria*

**ABSTRACT** This article examines the emergence of methamphetamine use and production as a social problem in Canada, particularly through media discourse. Rather than confine our discussion to print media, we also examine news photographs and headlines as cultural products. In addition, we briefly discuss several drug scares and media campaigns in Canada in the nineteenth century to contextualize the “crystal meth scare.” We discuss the tendency of contemporary newspaper articles, photographs and Internet sites about methamphetamine to reiterate conventional ideas about drugs and the people who use and produce them. Our analysis of print media and photos about methamphetamine centres on a special 2005 supplement to Vancouver newspaper The Province. Drawing from critical researchers whose analyses of media argue that news is a cultural product and that “law and order” is an important news category, we conclude with an examination of Canadian federal, provincial, and local responses to the crystal meth threat, which most often support law-and-order initiatives.

**KEYWORDS** Drug scares; Methamphetamine; Media discourse; Drug policy; The Province (Vancouver)

**RESUME** Dans cet article, nous discutons de la tendance qu’ont les reportages, photos et sites Internet de journaux contemporains à réitérer des idées conventionnelles sur la méthamphétamine, ses producteurs et ses consommateurs. Notre étude porte sur un supplément paru en 2005 dans le quotidien The Province de Vancouver. Elle s’inspire de chercheurs critiques qui soutiennent que les nouvelles sont un produit culturel et que « l’ordre public » en est une catégorie importante. Nous concluons notre article par l’examen d’initiatives gouvernementales au Canada face à la méthamphétamine qui très souvent privilégient cette idée d’ordre public.

**MOTS CLÉS** Alertes à la drogue; Méthamphétamine; Discours des médias; Politique antidrogue; Quotidien The Province de Vancouver

Since the late 1990s, methamphetamine has been identified by Canadian newspaper reporters, police, RCMP, community organizations, city and provincial task forces, and a number of politicians as a new and dangerous drug problem of “epidemic” proportions. Media reports typically suggest that the production of metham-

**Susan Boyd** is a Professor in Studies in Policy & Practice, Faculty of Human & Social Development, University of Victoria, PO Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2. Email: sboyd@uvic.ca

**Connie Carter** is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria, PO Box 1700, STN CSC, Victoria, BC V8W 2Y2. Email: ccarter@uvic.ca

©2010 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation
phenetamine (commonly referred to as “crystal meth”) is a social problem that fuels drug consumption. Law enforcement spokespeople and media reports describe methamphetamine “labs” as dangerous, sophisticated, large, extensive, and linked to organized crime. Methamphetamine users are portrayed as dangerous, out of control, and subject to instant addiction after one use of this substance. These claims are commonly found in the three major newspapers in British Columbia, Canada, but the tabloid *The Province* (Vancouver) has reported most extensively on the issue of crystal meth.

This article examines the emergence of methamphetamine use and production as a social problem in British Columbia, particularly through media discourse. Rather than confine our analysis to article text, we also examine news photos and headlines as cultural products. In addition, we briefly review several drug scares and media campaigns in Canada from the early nineteenth century to the present in order to contextualize the “crystal meth scare.” We argue that the contemporary meth scare in Canada is a “phenomenon” in its own right, a drug scare fuelled by law enforcement, media, politicians, and citizen groups. We also argue that article text, photos, and headlines are cultural products that introduce and circulate truth claims and systems of meaning about drug use, users, and sellers. To this end, we discuss the tendency of contemporary newspaper photos and Internet sites about methamphetamine to reiterate conventional ideas about drugs and the people who use and produce them. Our analysis of article text, headlines, and photos about methamphetamine centres on a special supplement to *The Province* (“The menace of crystal meth,” 2005). Our findings suggest that drug users and drug producers operate as cultural scapegoats that divert public attention from social/structural issues such as poverty and homelessness. We conclude with an examination of Canadian federal, provincial, and local responses to the crystal meth threat, which most often support law-and-order initiatives over other forms of social change.

Our analysis of the special supplement to *The Province* emerges from a larger three-year study titled “Media, Methamphetamine, and Marijuana Grow-op Project.” Under the direction of the lead author, we collected and analyzed 15 years (1995-2009) of newspaper articles in national, as well as provincial, and local newspapers in British Columbia, with a focus on how social problems were contextualized and discourse and systems of meaning were produced. In addition, we examined government and community websites and civil and criminal justice responses to methamphetamine and marijuana “grow-ops.” We draw from critical researchers whose analyses of media argue that news is a cultural product and “law and order” is an important news category.

In British Columbia, *The Province* is one of three major daily newspapers owned by Canwest Publishing’s Pacific Newspaper Group. *The Province* is a tabloid newspaper that uses large banner headlines and colour photographs to illustrate its news stories. It has a weekly readership of about 860,000 people. Information on the website for *The Province* claims that the newspaper “will take on a burning B.C. problem, such as crystal meth or stolen cars, and drive home what needs to be done to tackle the problem” (Pacific Newspaper Group, 2008). The cumulative weekly readership
of both the print and online versions of The Province is 866,800, compared with 841,600 for the other major daily in the same market, The Vancouver Sun (Pacific Newspaper Group, n.d.). The Province captures approximately 22% of the Vancouver readership, compared with 23% for the Sun and 4% for The Globe and Mail (Pacific Newspaper Group, 2009). Fifty-two percent of the readership of The Province is male, compared with 48% for the Sun, and 33% of the readers of The Province are aged 35 to 49, compared with the Sun’s 28%. Fifty percent of the readers of The Province have a household income over $75,000 (Sun: 49%), and 30% of the readers of The Province are university graduates, compared with 44% of Sun readers (Pacific Newspaper Group, 2009).

Beginning in the early 2000s, The Province was instrumental in reporting about crystal meth use and production in British Columbia. Reporters for this newspaper created a series on crystal meth and subsequently collected stories and photographs from this series to produce a special supplement, published in April 2005. The Province then made this supplement available to community groups throughout BC.²

Methamphetamine use in Canada

Although crystal meth use is thought to be an epidemic ravaging both large and small BC cities, drug survey data suggests that the prevalence of methamphetamine use is low in both general adult and school-age populations; its use, however, appears to be higher in some marginalized groups, such as homeless youth. Although our intent here is not necessarily to dispute claims about “meth epidemics,” we are interested in highlighting the significant social factors related to methamphetamine use in British Columbia. The 2004 national Canadian Addiction Survey indicates that only 0.8% of those surveyed (age 15 and older) reported using any type of amphetamine, including methamphetamine, in the year prior to the survey. In fact, Canadians reported using more legal, than illegal drugs, including alcohol and tobacco, contrary to news reportage on crystal meth. In the year prior to the survey, 79.3% of respondents reported consuming alcohol, and 14.1% reported using marijuana, the most commonly used illegal drug (Adla, Begin, & Sawka, 2005).

In the 2006 Vancouver Youth Drug Survey, 4.1% of youth between the ages of 14 and 25 reported that they had tried crystal meth in the year prior to the survey, and 2.2% reported using it in the month prior to the survey. Almost 90% had tried alcohol; almost 70% had tried marijuana. Fifty-six percent had tried tobacco. Reports of crystal meth use paled in comparison. This survey did note that vulnerable youth identifying as gay or bisexual and Indigenous youth had higher rates of crystal meth use than the rest of the surveyed population (Vancouver Coastal Health, 2007).

Homeless youth are also known to have higher rates of methamphetamine use. A recent At-Risk Youth Study conducted in Vancouver found that, of 478 “street-involved” youth surveyed between 2005 and 2006, 71% had used crystal meth (Wood, Stoltz, Zhang, Strathdee, Montaner, & Kerr, 2008). The study also discovered that these youth (in contrast with non-users of crystal meth) were more likely to be homeless and to have been sexually abused and involved in the sex trade. They were also more likely to have been previously imprisoned and to have a history of mental illness. Rather than calling for harsher penalties and laws or increased police enforcement,
these researchers suggested initiating a stimulant maintenance program and more harm reduction programs and moving toward a regulated market for all currently illegal drugs, similar to the model proposed by the BC Provincial Health Officers Council (Health Officers Council of British Columbia, 2005). However, these drug-use statistics and calls for a regulated market have been largely absent in media reports about crystal meth in BC.

Media and crime studies

As noted above, in order to analyze the special supplement on crystal meth from *The Province*, we drew from critical researchers. Since the 1970s, critical researchers have looked closely at news and representations of crime, justice, law, and culture (Altheide, 2002; Barak, 1994; Best, 1995, 1999; Cohen, 1972; Dowler, 2003; Eldridge, 1993; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1991; Garofalo, 1981; Hall, 1981; Heath & Gilbert, 1996; Howitt, 1998; Lambertus, 2004; Mann & Zatz, 2002; McMullan, 2001, 2005; McMullan & McClung, 2003; Surette, 2007; Thobani, 2007; Wykes, 2001; Young, 1981). Their analyses encouraged other researchers to examine news stories and photographs as cultural products and to see law and order as a specific news category (Hall, 1981). As these researchers have demonstrated, news reports help shape and circulate emerging “truth claims” about social issues. As McMullan (2005) noted, “truth claims are anchored in discourse and discursive formations that produce particular ways of organizing thinking, talking and doing in regard to selected topics” (p. 18). By examining law-and-order discourse and its aftermath, we can begin to understand how “power is exercised” through the representation of issues and ideas in some ways and not others (p. 23).

A number of other theorists also brought our attention to news media representations of illegal drugs (Chiricos, 2006; Coomber, Morris, & Dunn, 2000; Gomez, 1997; Goode, 2008; Greaves, Varcoe, Poole, Morrow, Johnson, Pederson, & Irwin, 2002; Humphries, 1999; Manning, 2006; Reinaman & Duskin, 1999; Reinaman & Levine, 1997a, 1997b, 2000; Taylor, 2008; Cohen & Young, 1981). Reinaman & Levine’s (1997a, 1997b, 2000) research, in particular, argued that U.S. news media offer narrow representations of drugs, drug use, selling, and criminal justice responses, and these media also attempt to shape public opinion about crime, especially drug crime. Taylor reveals how the “news media and criminal justice policy seemingly mirror each other’s beliefs” (2008, p. 382).

Cultural criminology provides a lens to understand the social, cultural, and political factors that shape media representations of methamphetamine use and production. Cultural criminology also provides ways to understand the expansion of criminal justice in Western nations and the continuous interplay of “moral entrepreneurship, moral innovation and transgression” (Hayward & Young, 2004, p. 259) and the proliferation of media representations of crime and deviance that characterize media reporting about illegal drugs (Ferrell & Websdale, 1999).

Print media and other texts introduce and contextualize social “problems” and present ideas about drugs (including methamphetamine); the nature of addiction; morality; criminality; the drug user, trafficker, and producer; organized crime; the effectiveness of treatment; law enforcement; criminal justice; and punishment. Media stories also provide an opportunity to analyze how the intersection of race/ethnicity,
gender, class, and culture shapes media discourse and drug policy. News articles and texts that introduce and contextualize social problems also transmit ideas about the scope of these issues, as well as notions about the appropriate modes of formal and informal regulation of these “problems.” Doyle (2006), for example, illuminated how “systems of meaning about crime and punishment develop in complex interplay between various cultural representations of crime, some modern, some age old, and with the pronouncements of other key authorities on crime, such as police and politicians” (p. 876).

Similar to Doyle’s analysis of crime in the media, we cannot know how diverse audiences may interpret discourses related to methamphetamine use and production. Nor can we hold *The Province* newspaper responsible for changes in Canada’s drug laws. As Jenkins points out, “media factors alone cannot provide a complete answer” (1999, p. 20) to why some drugs become the focus of deep concern. Indeed, scholars such as Marcel Martel (2006) note that a variety of interest and professional groups, as well as political cultures, have all played a part in shaping Canada’s drug-policy regimes. But as we indicated above, newspapers produce and circulate “truth” claims about drugs. Along with this, there are two factors that make this newspaper and special supplement deserving of a critical analysis. First, *The Province* claimed that it played a role in influencing public policy, and second, the newspaper organized and hosted a series of public forums throughout BC in the spring of 2005, ostensibly to warn citizens about the dangers of this drug (Ramsey, 2005b). Given that this newspaper claims that its reporting contributed to changes in drug regulations, we contend that its discursive shaping of the “problem” of methamphetamine deserves an in-depth analysis that can elucidate its major claims and speculate on the role that media reporting can have in shaping public responses to drug use.3

Drug scares

Several researchers have argued that the media has long been in the business of fuelling “drug scares.”4 Reinaman and Levine (1997a) noted that drug scares are a “phenomena in their own right” (p. 1) and have long been a popular media creation. The phrase “drug scare” refers to “designated periods” (p. 1) of time during which individuals, groups, and media forms identify and condemn a particular drug as a new social problem requiring increased attention and regulation. Drug scares are often fuelled by moral reformers, operating as vocal “claims-makers” who attempt to produce authoritative knowledge about a social problem by diagnosing and defining the scope of the problem (Best, 1995, 1999; Reinaman & Levine, 1997a, 1997b). Illegal drug use and trafficking are most often associated with racialized people or other scapegoats “whose behaviour is presented as a threat to social and moral values” (Martel, 2006, p. 14). Often the drug threat is constructed as disproportionate to the “physical threat” posed by the actual levels of drug use (Goode, 2008, p. 539). In North America, drug scares have been shaped by long-standing temperance ideologies stemming from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social reform movements, including the anti-opiate and temperance movements. Increased law enforcement and regulation were most often the response to these real and imagined social problems.

The history of Canada’s drug-policy regimes suggests that the criminalization of
drug use has been enacted as a racialized tool of social control. Following the 1907 anti-Asian riot in Vancouver, for example, Canada enacted the *Opium Act* with little media attention, parliamentary debate, or pharmacological evidence to support the regulation of this drug. At that time, middle- and upper-class Anglo-Saxon Canadians consumed opiate derivatives in the form of patent medicines and elixirs to care for their health and their families. Smokable opium was associated with Chinese-Canadians, and early legislation was enacted with the understanding that it would not be used against Anglo-Saxon Canadians (Solomon & Green, 1988). Thus Vancouver newspapers depicted smoking opium, rather than liquid opium use, as a racialized threat to the social and moral values of Anglo-Saxon citizens and the nation-state (Boyd, 2008; Martel, 2006; Valverde, 1991).

In the early 1920s, Canadians experienced their first major drug scare fuelled by media reports that proposed solutions to the problems associated with drugs. In 1920, Emily Murphy, a Canadian magistrate and moral reformer, published a series of sensationalized articles about drugs and trafficking in Canada's national *Maclean's* magazine. The “stated purpose of the series was to arouse public opinion to pressure the government for stricter drug laws” (Anthony & Solomon, 1973, p. 3). Her articles, published in the book *The Black Candle* (1922), also introduced Canadian readers to ideas about dangerous Chinese traffickers who sought to seduce and corrupt innocent White Christian people. Chinese and Black drug traffickers were portrayed as enslaving White women into a life of addiction and immorality. Central to Murphy’s argument was a strong desire to “protect” a Christian, Anglo-Saxon nation from the Other and from the drugs supposedly associated with these racialized and demonized groups. To this end, Murphy’s writings and accompanying photographs linked strong anti-Asian sentiments with a need for drug prohibition that included harsh laws and increased law enforcement. A number of Canadian researchers have asserted that Emily Murphy’s magazine articles and book, and the print media in Vancouver, played a crucial role in shaping drug policy in the early 1900s (Anthony & Solomon, 1973; Carstairs, 2006).

Historian Catherine Carstairs’ examination of the media-fuelled drug panic in Canada during the early 1920s found that newspapers in Vancouver (both *The Vancouver Sun* and the *Vancouver Daily World*) were important producers of racialized drug discourse. From 1920 to 1922, Vancouver’s oldest newspaper, the *Vancouver Daily World*, “blamed Asians for the spread of the drug habit” (Carstairs, 2006, p. 26). Anti-Asian discourse fuelled not only early drug regulation, but restrictive and exclusionary immigration policy. Newspaper articles in the *Vancouver Daily World*, for example, argued that Anglo-Saxon Canadians needed to “defend themselves against” (p. 27) the effects of drug use. These articles also posed solutions for these problems in headlines such as “Deport the drug traffickers.” Over a several month period in 1922, the *Vancouver Daily World* and *The Vancouver Sun* continued to produce stories accompanied by photos about “white victims and Chinese villains” (p. 27). The *Vancouver Daily World* encouraged citizen groups and organizations to come together to create petitions and pass resolutions calling on the federal government to enact laws prohibiting drug use and trafficking by enacting mandatory sentences for drug possession.
and trafficking and legislation to deport Asian people. Thousands of Vancouverites complied. The media, moral reformers, citizen campaigns (mass meetings), and the RCMP argued successfully for harsher federal legislation to regulate opium use, production, and distribution.

Similarly to earlier drug scares in Canada, *The Vancouver Sun* and *The Province* contributed to societal fears about the epidemic of youthful heroin use in the east side of Vancouver in the early 1950s, especially among vulnerable young girls (Carstairs, 2006). Professionals in the city of Vancouver were divided about how to respond to heroin use; some called for medical care for “addicts” arrested for possession and harsher sentences for drug traffickers (Giffen, Endicott, & Lambert, 1991; Stevenson, Lingley, Trasov, & Stansfield, 1956). Yet law-and-order solutions won out, and in 1954, amendments were made to the *Opium and Narcotic Drug Act*, including a new offence of possession for the purpose of trafficking. At the same time, the Act further pushed the “burden of proof” of innocence onto the shoulders of the accused. Law enforcement officials continued to push for new and harsher legislation, resulting in the *Narcotic Control Act* of 1961. These changes further established the criminogenic nature of both drug use and users. At the same time, maintenance or drug substitution programs were firmly rejected by law enforcement officials (Giffen et al., 1991).

Increased and sensationalist media reporting occurred in the 1960s, at a time when White middle-class youth began to experiment with drugs such as LSD and marijuana. Although arrest rates tell us little about use rates, it is worth noting that in Canada there were only 21 marijuana possession-related arrests in 1960. However, as the 1960s progressed, marijuana use became more popular and was particularly associated with the counterculture movement; arrest rates skyrocketed (Carstairs, 2006; Martel, 2006). The Commission of Inquiry into the Non-Medical Use of Drugs (known as the Le Dain Commission), appointed by the Canadian federal government in 1969, was established to examine this phenomenon and make recommendations for policy and legislative changes. The Le Dain Commission also undertook a uniquely broad examination of magazine and newspaper reports about marijuana and LSD. The Commission noted that the number of newspaper articles about drug use increased significantly between 1966 and 1970 and found that the media “amplified” the negative impact of marijuana and LSD. Because LSD use was associated with White middle-class youth, rather than working-class and racialized people, more attention was given to the perceived dangers of the drug rather than to its criminogenic effects. Goode noted that concerns and media reporting in the U.S. surrounding LSD use in the 1960s were “disproportionate to its physical threat” (Goode, 2008, p. 539); a similar claim can be made for news reporting in Canada. Vivid photographs depicting the worst effects of drug use often accompanied this reporting.

Claude Henault conducted a remarkably thorough analysis of media representations from 1961 to 1971 for the Le Dain Commission that included sending a questionnaire to 46 print media outlets in Canada. The Commissioners sought to understand whether or not the media reports attempted to shape perceptions about illegal drugs. Henault found that early newspaper reports of illegal drugs, especially marijuana,
relied on police and court sources; later reportage also included drug and alcohol institutions and the medical profession as news sources (Henault, 1971).

In Canada during the 1960s, as in other Western nations, marijuana users were categorically young, White, and middle-class. In order to argue for more punitive laws and police powers, marijuana first had to be condemned by moral reformers and seen as dangerous; so, too, the producers of marijuana. However, it would take another 30 years before law enforcement and the media would have much success in making claims about the dangers of marijuana growers (Boyd & Carter, 2008; Grayson, 2008; Stoddart, 2004).

Drug researchers Craig Reinarman and Harry Levine (1997b) argued that the U.S. “news media and politicians played the most important roles in establishing” what is now referred to as the “crack scare” in the mid-1980s (p. 19). In their analysis of the crack scare, they demonstrated that both media and politicians ignored and misrepresented evidence. The crack scare and the refuelled drug war it propelled provided a handy scapegoat and diverted attention away from growing urban poverty in the Reagan/Bush era. In a similar vein, we argue that contemporary concerns about meth use and production in Canada constitute a “drug scare” fuelled by a range of social actors, including the media, law enforcement, politicians, and citizen groups.

Meth and the media
Meth use has been the subject of two waves of intensified media attention in the U.S., one in the early 1990s and another in the early 2000s. Studies of this reporting argued that this particular scare echoes the claims made in earlier drug scares. Media reports have tended to exaggerate the prevalence of methamphetamine use by drawing on statistics in a selective manner (Armstrong, 2007; Jenkins, 1994; King, 2006). Meth use has also been typically described in dramatic terms that obfuscate its actual use; terms such as “epidemic” and “plague” are stock phrases used to describe the prevalence of this drug (Jenkins, 1994; King, 2006). Media reporting of methamphetamine also draws on notions of contagion by making universalizing claims about its use; moral entrepreneurs warn repeatedly that its use will spread uncontrollably, and young people in particular are said to be at risk (Armstrong, 2007; King, 2006). Claims about crystal meth suggest that it is a unique contagion—more addictive and uniquely difficult to treat than other drugs (Jenkins, 1994; King, 2006). As with other media-based drug scares, the effects of meth use are described through the use of exemplary or particularly dramatic personal stories selectively chosen to demonstrate the evils of this drug (Jenkins, 1994; King, 2006). More often than not, these personal stories portray meth use as the only problem in a particular person’s life, effectively eliminating the social context for drug use. Other claims about crystal meth contain fears of outsiders and the fate of the nation, though most reporting tends to focus on the potentially dangerous effects for White middle-class users. Media reporting of meth use tends to evoke these fears dichotomously by distancing bad users from normal citizens and placing them “outside the boundaries of middle-class propriety” (Armstrong, 2007, p. 432).

The Province: Special series on crystal meth
The cover of the special edition of The Province (2005) gives the reader a sense of the
articles and photographs included in the supplement. As with other drug scares, crystal meth media reporting emphasizes the uniquely addictive and contagious agency of this drug. The headline of the special edition reads “The menace of crystal meth.” In smaller print, it states, “Educating you and your community.” Inside the supplement, headings such as “Meth ‘ravaging’ towns in B.C.,” “B.C. won’t take U.S. initiative,” and “Make punishment fit crime” lay out the problem of meth use and engage the reader in the solutions. In the article about meth “ravaging” BC towns, the reporter emphasizes the agentic qualities attributed to meth: “Fast, cheap and out of control. Methamphetamine is ripping through B.C. communities and across all demographics, from street kids to suburban housewives” (Ramsey, 2005e, p. 3).

Headlines and textual claims in the supplement emphasized the law-and-order focus needed to control this drug. In the article “Drug Ingredients as close as your local store: BC won’t take U.S. initiative” (Ramsay, 2005a), the author reported on legislation debated in the state of Washington that would require people selling ephedrine or pseudoephedrine (common drugs in allergy medications such as Sudafed) to be licensed as a pharmacist and for buyers of the drug to show photo ID and sign a register. The same article also claimed that unlike in the U.S., in Canada, ingredients for the making of crystal meth are easily purchased at local hardware and Walmart stores. He claimed that the RCMP and communities “ravaged by meth addiction want action taken” (Ramsey, 2005a, p. 4). In an article entitled “Make punishment fit crime,” the same reporter quoted a number of Conservative Members of Parliament who called for harsher federal laws for meth production by moving this drug from Schedule III to Schedule I (with heroin and cocaine) under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (Ramsey, 2005d). One Member of Parliament claimed that his “constituents are frustrated by ‘lax’ sentences handed to meth producers and dealers” (p. 9). Ramsey included a statement by an “anti-meth” activist from Maple Ridge, BC, who called for more efforts to treat addiction within the criminal justice system through mandatory treatment.

Contemporary media representations of crystal meth users and producers draw from stock characters and racist narratives about illicit drugs. Yet, unlike other drug panics in Canada, crystal meth is depicted as a “White” drug, thus no mention of race is needed. It is implied by the use of White faces in photographs. In fact, the emphasis placed on its availability and appeal as the “drug of choice” for White youth is one of the ways that crystal meth is shown to be dangerous in this reporting. In this special supplement, crystal meth users and producers are White, yet they are also portrayed as behaving differently than law-abiding citizens. These ideas about meth use mirror some of the distinctions the Le Dain Commission found in its analysis of media coverage of marijuana and LSD use in the 1960s (Canada, 1973). In general, media coverage of meth highlights the dangerous health effects of its use, noting the potential for ruination of young people, while reserving its most extreme moral condemnation for drug producers and sellers.5

**News photographs and truth claims**

In analyzing The Province’s special series on crystal meth, we sought to keep in mind that newspaper text and pictures work together as a site in the “production of meanings and truth-claims” (Purvis & Hunt, 1993, p. 497). Drawing from Fraser & Moore’s
analysis of “illegal drugs discourse,” we too were interested in making clear how a “particular understanding of order is in operation” (p. 741) via text and photographs related to crystal meth. We also sought to understand the significance of the photographs used in this newspaper, because images in news media are viewed as “facts” that speak for themselves (Hall, 1981; Huxford, 2001). As Stuart Hall (1981) suggests, photos have ideological significance because they “can enhance, locate, or specify the ideological theme, once it has been produced, by a sort of reciprocal mirror-effect” (p. 242, italics in original). Applying Hall’s exploration of news photos to Internet images, we can see how representations of illegal drug users, drugs, drug paraphernalia and ingredients, and drug “labs” are fetishized in photos “refracting the ideological theme at another level”—a theme that we come to recognize and understand, in this case, as the “truth” of illicit drugs (p. 242). Photographs of the effects of drug use also help to naturalize political claims by seeming to offer incontrovertible physical evidence of these claims. In this context, the visuals, that is, photographs used to illustrate and accompany newspaper stories, provide a particularly effective shorthand form of discourse that evokes for the reader the two most familiar stories of drug use—its criminality and its addictive/disease connotations.

Drug users
In the crystal meth special supplement to The Province, headlines, news stories, and photographs worked together to produce a narrative about methamphetamine that positioned it specifically as a threat to otherwise peaceful families, neighbourhoods, and cities. The supplement included photographs from recent news stories that showed a supposed drug user falling naked out of a window from a tall building and close-ups of users with signs of extreme physical decay such as dramatic weight loss, skin abrasions, and rotting teeth. The photographs work to reiterate and normalize the idea that these atypical examples of drug use represent typical meth users (Giulianotti, 1997). This process of normalization freezes in place otherwise highly political and contestable depictions of meth use. The message is clear: drug use is so deterministic that it undermines the morality of the photographic subject and his/her capacity for self-rule. At the same time, textual claims emphasized the exceptionally dangerous aspects of meth use through the use of personal stories. In one case, a mother of a now-deceased son pleaded for more controls on the drug. This story is led by the headline, “He was in hell,’ says mom who lost her son” (Ramsey, 2005c). The sense of loss and tragedy is illustrated with a family photograph of the mother and her son as a boy, presumably before his meth use. This personal story makes only brief mention of other social and personal factors that would contextualize this young man’s death. Like other media representations, the social and psychological complexities of drug users’ lives are either
simply erased or minimally considered, leaving only drug use as the central difficulty that affects their lives. In another part of the supplement, an “anti-meth” activist in Maple Ridge is quoted as saying “90 per cent of that community’s homeless are meth addicts, that 80 per cent of car thefts are meth-related and that 30 per cent of property crime is rooted in the addiction” (Ramsey, 2005d, p. 9). These claims foreclose discussion of the broader social, cultural, and economic factors that affect users’ lives, including lack of housing, healthcare, and meaningful employment opportunities.

In stories about drug use, news photographs also work in tandem with text to help reiterate temporal claims about drug use. News photographs most often take events from the past and transport readers and viewers to the scene of a presumably unmediated event or phenomenon (Huxford, 2001). But this special supplement made dramatic use of “before” and “after” pictures of drug users that illustrated its textual claims about the unique dangers of methamphetamine use. “Before” and “after” photographs enjoy a long history that contributes to their intelligibility. This type of photograph, for example, emerged in the late 1800s, documenting children and adults as they entered and left institutions such as children’s homes and prisons (Tagg, 1999).

Like these earlier forms, the temporal dimension of “before” and “after” photographs of drug users makes immediate cross-associations between drug use and physical decay of the photographic subject. The viewer is invited to witness first-hand the physical effects of drug use, in this case, of methamphetamine. Each photo alone would tell us little about the intended meaning of the images, but together the images created a timeline of drug use with an implied narrative form. In the case of “before” pictures in The Province’s special supplement, subjects were relatively untouched by the use of drugs; thus providing the opposite effect of earlier home and prison photos. “Before” pictures in the supplement to The Province depicted subjects who were White, physically healthy, well dressed, and well groomed. In the “after” pictures, subjects were depicted as unkempt, emaciated, covered in sores, tired, and aged. Given the positioning of “before” and “after” pictures in relationship to each other, the reader is meant to understand that drug use has taken a physical and emotional toll on the subjects that presumably cannot be explained by other factors.

The cover of the special edition of The Province displayed a “before” and “after” photo of a young White woman that was repeated through the supplement (see Photo 2). The “before” photograph, dated 1998, depicted the head and shoulders of a girl whose dark hair was neatly styled. Her complexion was clear and unblemished. She appeared to be wearing a floral dress. The “after” photo was dated 2004, and the young girl was transformed. Her hair was dyed blond, and it looked stringy and long. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her complexion was pale and prematurely aged. She appeared to be wearing a tank top that revealed her shoulders. Particularly for female subjects, “before” and “after” pictures often substantiate the supposedly premature
aging and lack of attention to physical beauty that accompanies drug use. In other cases, subjects were depicted with open sores, symptoms of physical exhaustion, and untidy appearances. In all cases, a seamless relationship between drug use and its physical and emotional effects was produced in line with a narrative that treated all drug use as negative and addictive.

**Dangerous products and labs**

The Province’s special supplement also included a focus on the production of crystal meth that emphasized its ease and ubiquity. Again, headlines and photographs worked together to emphasize this message. A headline such as “Drug ingredients are as close as your local store” was accompanied by a staged photograph of precursor chemicals for the production of crystal meth apparently purchased at local stores for the sum of $100.58. Against a black background, the photo depicted white cans of acetone and Coleman camp fuel, plastic containers of muriatic acid and methyl hydrate, and a package of a commonly available decongestant. This photograph substantiated textual claims that these products are common in household usage and easily available for purchase.

A second photograph, located on the opposite page, transported the viewer to a past event to depict the aftermath of a meth lab explosion in what appears to be a residential neighbourhood in Surrey, British Columbia. Accompanied by the headline “Meth-lab waste spreads its poison,” the photograph showed graphic details of the explosion to dramatically illustrate textual claims that drug labs pose significant dangers. The photo depicted a suburban house with two new-looking SUVs in the driveway. The side of the house was partially destroyed, and there was rubble all over the yard, including large pieces of wood and concrete, tubing, metal, and glass. In the background, another suburban home can be seen through green foliage. At the bottom of the page, a small sidebar, entitled “An avalanche coming this way,” noted that the number of labs investigated by BC’s RCMP had increased. Though the number of labs noted in this article were few (8 in 1998 and 19 in 2004), the article suggested that neighbouring Washington State’s experience with an
increasing number of small labs predicted an “avalanche coming” to BC (“Meth lab spreads its poison,” 2005).

While both photographs (of precursor chemicals and lab explosions) effectively illustrated the newspaper’s claims about the dangers of crystal meth production, taken together they offer a deeper metaphorical meaning: drug production and its precursor chemicals pose a growing risk to otherwise safe residential communities. In effect, the photographs provide evidence of a claim that The Province cannot fully substantiate textually: drug production, and meth labs in particular, pose public safety risks to good neighbourhoods, good citizens, and good homes—meaning, in this case, the readers’ own homes.

Crisis discourse and responses
The collection of photographs and headlines in the special supplement to The Province also help to substantiate a future-oriented crisis discourse: methamphetamine poses a crisis of risk and safety for the future. More individuals will be drawn in as users, and more neighbourhoods will be threatened by drug production. By evoking these emotions, news photographs help to substantiate rhetorical claims about the relationship between drugs, crisis, and social disorder. The evocation of crisis and disorder helps to make otherwise politically debatable claims seem incontestable because of the urgency of the issue. Images of drug use and production also provide a bounded set of meanings about drug use and offer, by implication, a bounded set of appropriate social responses to drug use. The sense of crisis depicted in these photographs, combined with the depiction of methamphetamine as a drug that users cannot control, legitimates social and legal interventions in its production and use despite low overall drug-use prevalence.

A Canadian federal response to the “meth scare” occurred in June 2005. Substances commonly used in the production of methamphetamine, such as red phosphorus and hydriodic acid, were added to the list of Class A precursors in Precursor Control Regulations, Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. In August 2005, methamphetamine was rescheduled from a Schedule III to a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. Thus the maximum penalties now apply to methamphetamine, including the possibility of life sentences for trafficking, and production and possession can garner sentences of up to seven years.

We are not claiming that The Province was the sole instigator for these legal changes—politicians and citizen groups were also influential. However, we do see the paper’s reportage as significant because, although national, BC, and local papers reported on methamphetamine and their reportage was fairly homogenous, The Province stood out from the rest in its hyperbolic rhetoric, its community-based outreach to “concerned” citizens and groups, and its claims that its special series on crystal meth was instrumental in helping mobilize political pressure to move methamphetamine to Schedule I of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. There is good reason to suggest that The Province’s hyperbolic reporting should also be understood as part of the social struggles in British Columbia over the direction of drug policy. Municipal governments in BC have supported both health-based approaches to drug use and increased enforcement against drug producers and sellers. Vancouver is
the site of North America’s first supervised injection facility as well as a determined
social justice movement aimed at ending prohibition and addressing both the poverty
and marginalization of its downtown drug users (Boyd, MacPherson, & Osborn,
2009). Vancouver’s numerous surrounding municipalities have not been as readily
supportive of harm reduction efforts and have chosen instead to embrace more regu-
laratory forms of drug policy (Carter, 2009).

Due to public pressure coming from a variety of sources, the BC provincial gov-
ernment responded to concerns about methamphetamine. A key source of this pres-
sure came from a number of community-based crystal meth task forces established
in several communities in BC during 2004 and 2005. Composed of concerned par-
ents, service providers, and law enforcement representatives, these groups worked
actively to pressure the BC government to fund programs addressing this drug. In
addition, the BC provincial government published a strategy document addressing
the issue of crystal meth in 2004 that committed it to prevention and other activities.
In November 2005, in response to growing concerns that meth use was becoming an
“epidemic,” Premier Gordon Campbell also announced a new $7-million initiative
that included $2 million for individual community initiatives, $1 million for public
awareness in public schools, $2 million for a major public awareness advertising cam-
paign, and $2 million for enhanced treatment. A further $2 million went toward the
creation of the Crystal Meth Secretariat in the Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor
General. The Secretariat’s website highlights key initiatives, including a training DVD
for police, fire, and ambulance personnel to identify and contain “clandestine drug
labs”; development of educational resources for schools; and a media campaign that
featured television and print advertising encouraging parents to talk to children
about crystal meth (British Columbia Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General,
2010a). The website also lists 160 grants given to community organizations through-
out BC to address the use and production of crystal methamphetamine. Meth
Watch6 programs were established in a number of communities. In addition, DARE
and other drug-awareness programs were offered in a number of locations in partner-
ship with the RCMP, including elementary schools, as well as through community
education sessions for youth and adults on First Nations reserves and in rural com-
munities. The Crystal Meth Secretariat website also provides an overview of network-
ing events and a crystal meth fact sheet. The fact sheet claims that “crystal meth has
become a major concern in British Columbia” (British Columbia Ministry of Public
Safety and Solicitor General, 2010b). It also claims that meth labs have increased, that
they are dangerous, and that meth use among students in grades six to twelve is
thought to be as high as 8%. A prominent side box next to this statement claims that
“20 percent of people who use meth become dependent” (British Columbia Ministry
of Public Safety and Solicitor General, 2010b). References are provided for none of
the claims.

Conclusion
Reinarman & Duskin (1999), in their analysis of drugs and media, pointed to a
process of objectification in their discussion of the forms of “pharmacological deter-
minism” (p. 83) that appear in news stories about illicit drug use. News stories and
photographs separate persons and events from their social contexts, creating portraits of “addicts” so insanely ruled by their dependence on drugs that they cannot act as moral subjects, nor can they operate in their own best interest. Typically, these forms of news reporting depict the worst possible effects of drug use. In this regard, the articles in this special supplement from The Province are no exception. The panicked discourse evident in these news stories suggests that these “crises” may reflect what David Garland (2008) called an effort to turn methamphetamine use into a “cultural scapegoat” (p. 15) for social anxieties about youth culture, homelessness, and the perceived erosion of racial hierarchies. Social uncertainties about phenomena such as global free-market economies and their effects on the stability of employment, as well as neo-liberal cuts to social programs, contribute to this climate of unease and anxiety. “Cultural scapegoats” not only become a convenient target for these displaced concerns, but serve to override activist pressures for a regulated drug market in favour of increased efforts in enforcement and other forms of legal regulation (Garland, 2008).

Past and current drug strategy has primarily focused on law enforcement and other criminal justice initiatives. There has been concerted effort, especially over the last 10 years, by researchers, drug users, and workers in the field to expand harm reduction and treatment funding, to limit law enforcement efforts, and to move toward a public health and human rights model rather than a criminal justice model. The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network has suggested that three quarters of the resources of Canada’s drug strategy are directed toward enforcement-related efforts. Yet enforcement-related efforts have never been appropriately evaluated (DeBeck, Wood, Montaner, & Kerr, 2006). In fact, it appears that enforcement efforts, as well as prohibitive legal frameworks, have been a dismal failure. Despite increased funding, enhanced police powers, and harsher laws, illegal drugs are still available, and the manufacturing and selling of illicit drugs continues.

Ignoring statistics about both actual drug-use rates and the accompanying social factors, the provincial and federal governments and community organizations continue to identify methamphetamine use and production as a major social problem that requires new forms of criminal and civil regulation. Drug scares such as the panicked discourse that has emerged around crystal meth are not random events, nor do they emerge from nowhere. Our exploration of newspaper stories and photographs allows us to establish what categories of persons are making claims about this drug and to analyze the content and character of these claims about drug use. These analyses are central to understanding how some ideas and beliefs about drug users and drug use become prevalent and even inform policy and legislative changes. By linking methamphetamine use and production with crises, disorder, disease, and criminalized and unruly White bodies, systems of meaning about illegal drugs are re-activated and brought into focus. An analysis of how both media-based text and photos transmit ideas about the scope of social problems and proposals for their regulation also allows us to understand more fully how formal and informal modes of regulation evolve and become institutionalized in legal codes and policy frameworks.
Notes
1. The project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and a seed grant from the British Columbia Mental Health and Addictions Network. Susan Boyd is the principal researcher and Connie Carter (ABD) is the senior research assistant on the project.

2. Our research team found a copy of this special supplement at a community event sponsored by the Port Alberni Crystal Meth Society on September 28, 2006. Like at similar events held throughout BC, community groups set up booths to distribute information on their services and provide “information” about the dangers of crystal meth use and production.

3. During 2005, The Province newspaper claimed that its reporting on crystal meth was instrumental in legislative changes. The author, Matthew Ramsey, states, “A Province feature series on the dangers and prevalence of crystal methamphetamine in B.C. was a major motivating factor in the federal government’s toughening of the laws surrounding the drug. Dosanjh said he read the week-long series after it ran in April” (Ramsey, 2005b, p. A4). The series to which this excerpt refers is the one upon which the special supplement was based.

4. For example, Reinarman & Levine (1997a) argued that the U.S. media played a crucial role in constructing the “crack crises” in the 1980s and attempted to shape public reactions, policy, and law to contain what was perceived, at that time, as an epidemic threatening young people. The crack epidemic was racialized and represented as originating in the city, specifically in poor and predominantly Black U.S. neighbourhoods. The threat of the epidemic spreading to White America was central to drug discourse produced at this time.

5. One such newspaper article quoted a city councillor from View Royal, BC, who claimed that “Every day that passes, we lose more children and more young people to this drug. Time for talk is over, it’s time for action” (Bell, 2005, p. A2).

6. Meth Watch programs are usually aimed at monitoring the sale of precursor chemicals from pharmacies and other retail outlets.

References


Murphy, Emily. (1973). The black candle. Toronto, ON: Coles. (Originally published in 1922)


Ramsey, Matthew. (2005a, April/May). Drug ingredients as close as your local store: B.C. won't take U.S. initiative. The Province (Vancouver), Special Edition: The menace of crystal meth, p. 4.

Ramsey, Matthew. (2005c, April/May). “He was in hell,” says mom who lost her son. *The Province* (Vancouver), Special Edition: The menace of crystal meth, p. 7.


Ramsey, Matthew. (2005e, April/May). Meth “ravaging” towns in B.C. *The Province* (Vancouver), Special Edition: The menace of crystal meth, p. 3.


