

The haunting spectacle of crystal meth: A media-created mythology?

Crime Media Culture

8(3) 315–332

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DOI: 10.1177/1741659012443234

cmc.sagepub.com

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Abstract

For over a decade the media have been reporting in alarmist tones that ‘crystal meth is coming’ to the UK. Using clichéd discourse (‘crazed’, ‘epidemic’, ‘horror’, etc.) and visual images of deformed and disfigured faces, the meanings attached to the drug are clear: crystal meth creates dangerous ‘others’. Yet an identifiable crystal meth problem has hitherto failed to materialise, and press reporting of the issue appears to constitute an exemplary case of what Stuart Hall has described as a double movement within ideological discourse: a movement towards propaganda and a movement towards myth. This article examines how the threat of ‘ice’, as it is commonly known, has been symbolically, aesthetically and textually constructed in the British media, and how this representation has created its own hyper-reality, influencing political debate, drug policy and public reaction. The analysis places particular emphasis on the importance of visual images as a sensory expression of cultural meaning, an aspect of media representation that has too often been theoretically and pragmatically neglected within mainstream criminology.

Keywords

crystal meth, drug policy, myth, spectacle, visual images

Introduction

Media-fuelled panics about drug use and drug control have occurred throughout the history of the modern press. From Chinese opium dens in 19th-century Britain, through marijuana smokers in Notting Hill during the 1960s, to current concerns about crystal methamphetamine (crystal meth), popular perceptions of drugs and drug users¹ have been influenced by disproportionate and sensationalised media reporting. Like previous media coverage of illicit drugs, then, British news media have constructed crystal meth users within various guises of ‘otherness’, premised on race, sexuality, criminality and disease. Users are typically ascribed a combination of stereotypical

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traits and their out-group status is emphasised through polarized extremes that distinguish 'us' from 'them': the normal and the deviant. Such bifurcation constructs drug users as 'the enemy within', reinforcing cultural fears of otherness and emphasising 'our' idealised selves (Greer and Jewkes, 2005).

But while such arguments have been well rehearsed in relation to the British media, they usually concern drug problems that are visible and tangible, even if the reporting is overblown. What is striking about the coverage of crystal meth, or 'ice' as it is commonly known, is that the media's predicted epidemic in the UK (see, for example, *Independent on Sunday*, 2004; *Mail on Sunday*, 2010) has proved to be an exaggeration of mythic proportions, and serves as an example of how alarmist media representations have initiated spontaneous, ill-advised policy reactions, with inevitable but detrimental consequences (Wilson, 2008; Silverman, 2010). Quite simply, indicators measuring drug use in the UK suggest its use is almost non-existent. According to the British Crime Survey, adults' use of all methamphetamines (i.e. not just crystal meth) last year was less than 0.05% and 0% for last month usage (Hoare and Moon, 2010). Comparable statistics also show no evidence of users presenting to drug treatment services (NTA, 2010) and, with the exception of a small number of unverified seizures reported in the media (*Daily Mail*, 2010a; *Sun*, 2009a), there were no methamphetamine seizures officially recorded in the UK during 2009/2010 (see Mulchandani, Hand and Panesar, 2010; UNODC, 2010). There is evidence that crystal meth use is widespread in certain parts of the United States and Australia where news media have linked users with poverty, joblessness, high offending rates and mental and physical illness, including psychosis, HIV and AIDS, but the predicted arrival of an 'ice age' in Britain has not materialised, despite the *Sun* reporting as recently as 18 June 2011 that 'deadly crystal meth is here' (*Sun*, 2011a). In a deliberate manipulation of the facts of crystal meth use in the UK, news media have published stories about the drug which not only emulate the reporting styles of countries that *have* a crystal meth problem, but have used their photographic evidence and statistics to illustrate the impending (but imagined) crisis in the UK.

Method

In order to analyse news reports and visual representations of crystal meth and its users and to try and account for the disjuncture between reporting and reality, a two-fold methodological approach was adopted. First, a keyword search was undertaken using the InfoTrac newspaper database and the Internet search engine Nexis for key terms 'crystal meth' and 'crystal methamphetamine'. These searches yielded approximately 1,254 articles in UK national newspapers published between 2004 and 2011, which were then reduced to 537 by removing irrelevant articles and non-news stories (including TV guides, book reviews and quizzes). Second, and mindful of the shortcomings of Nexis as a research tool² (see Greer, 2009, section 2 and Jewkes, 2011a, for more detailed critiques), the second stage involved a more focused search in which 52 key articles incorporating visual images were isolated. Of these 20 (38%) were accompanied by the faces of crystal meth users, enabling us to conduct a detailed semiotic analysis of the photographs used and the relationship between written text and image. We also analysed the pages on which the stories were situated in order to understand intra- and inter-textual relationships, and how news stores are composed and juxtaposed to subtly suggest a particular ideological worldview (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1991) (see Figure 1).

17 bans of crash lout

A BANNED motorist who fled a crash thinking he had killed a mum and her two teenage children had been disqualified 17 times.

Paul Taylor, 35, was uninsured and twice the drink-drive limit when he smashed into their car. He had three earlier drink-drive convictions, nine for stealing or taking vehicles and 16 for driving uninsured, a court heard. The election of Guildford, Surrey, took the car involved in September's crash from his landlord.

Taylor got 20 months' jail at Guildford crown court and a four-year ban. Judge John Crocker said: "It's one of the worst cases I've seen."

China gag for Stones

THE Rolling Stones have been ordered to ditch songs with sexy lyrics when they play in China. The Ministry of Culture told them to drop Let's Spend the Night Together, Beast of Burden, Brown Sugar and Honky Tonk Woman from their gig in Shanghai next month.

It is the second time the Stones have been censored. US TV bosses insisted rude lyrics were cut for their Superbowl performance last month. The Shanghai gig is the band's first concert in China. They were not allowed in before amid fears of "spiritual pollution". And a 2003 gig was cancelled because of SARS.

Pervert jobs war

BOSSSES face five years' jail for failing to prevent known paedophiles working with children.

They could also be fined up to £5,000 for not properly vetting staff. The crackdown is part of the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Bill unveiled yesterday by Education Secretary Ruth Kelly.

It follows a recent outcry when ministers cleared a number of teachers on the sex offenders' register to work in schools.

A single new register will replace the current range of separate "danger" lists - and will be available on-line to parents.

Ms Kelly said: "This is an important reform."

Lab plan to halt flu

MILITARY-style rapid-response labs should be set up to counter bird flu, US experts say.

Most of the labs set up worldwide by America after the Second World War to detect viruses, contain infections and prepare vaccines have now shut. Scientists Dr Jean-Paul Chretien and Dr David Blazes wrote in the journal *Nature*: "We need these more than ever."

A British task force was set up yesterday to look at ways of tackling the virus which has killed 93. Meanwhile, Germans were told to keep their cats indoors after a cat became the first mammal in Europe to die from H5N1.

DON'T BE DOPEY

By BOB ROBERTS
Deputy Political Editor
CLAIMS that cannabis use leads to harder drugs were yesterday dismissed as nonsense.

A report to MPs said most scientists rejected the idea that smoking dope encouraged people to try out Class A drugs like heroin and cocaine.

It said: "The gateway theory that the use of drugs like cannabis leads on to the use of harder drugs has little evidence to support it despite ongoing research."

The report to the Commons Science Committee also questioned the whole system used to classify illegal drugs.

It said ministers' decisions to put drugs into Class A, B or C categories with different penalties were not based on scientific evidence.

The report said: "Drugs are



Scientists say smoking cannabis DOESN'T lead to taking harder drugs

not classified on the basis of a set of standards for the harm they cause. The criteria used have varied depending on the drug in question."

The report said magic mushrooms were classified as a Class A drug despite little evidence they did much harm.

It said ecstasy was also a Class A drug for "unclear" reasons and despite evidence it was "several thousand times less dangerous than heroin".

Committee chairman Phil Willis said there were real questions about whether the classification system worked.

He said: "We want to see whether the system as it stands has a sound basis of evidence."

"We want to see whether it is evidence rather than political expediency that is driving decisions."

The Home Office is also growing increasingly con-

cerned the system does not work. In January Home Secretary Charles Clarke announced plans for a complete overhaul of the way drugs are categorised and prohibited.

Class A drugs which carry a seven-year penalty for possession include heroin, LSD, ecstasy, cocaine, crack and magic mushrooms.

Class B drugs are amphetamines and barbiturates carrying five years for possession.

Class C drugs include cannabis, steroids, and the tranquilliser ketamine which carry two years for possession.

The report comes after a UN drugs agency warned this week of the rise of dance and sex drug methamphetamine, or crystal meth.

It said it is more addictive than crack cocaine and is becoming a global problem.

The International Narcotics Control Board called on governments to introduce tougher restrictions on chemicals used in the manufacture of the drug, which allows users to stay awake for days and increases sexual arousal.

London-based INCB president Professor Hamid Ghodse said: "If I want to pick on one major drug problem pandemic today, it is methamphetamine."

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YOUR FACE IS A METH



Shock pictures of what new danger drug can do to you

THESE horrifying pictures reveal the ravaging effects of the dance-sex drug poised to sweep Britain.

The police mugs show how the appearance of a group of crystal meth addicts in Multnomah County, in Oregon USA, changed after they started snorting, smoking, injecting or eating the drug.

And the unseen effects are just as alarming. Crystal meth rots users' teeth down to blackened stumps and can make them claw at imaginary bugs they believe are crawling beneath their skin.

Side effects include severe weight

loss, paranoia and heart and lung problems leading to death.

John Marden, addiction expert at London's Kings College, said: "After a honeymoon period, the drug hits the user's memory and pleasure zones in the brain."

It can create a psychotic disorder that's like paranoid schizophrenia. People hear and see things and have rages and mood swings."

Will Nutland, spokesman for HIV/AIDS group the Terrence Hig-

gins Trust, warned the drug is increasingly popular in gay clubs.

He said: "The user quickly gets hooked to get over the comedown, which involves dreadful headaches, nausea and paranoia."

Graduate Nick 21, from London first took crystal meth a year ago. He said: "It's very addictive. The hit lasts for three or four hours."

"The dreadful comedown forced Nick to quit his job. He said: 'I feel depressed and lethargic. I smoke cannabis and get drunk to ward off the comedown. I've been told that if I keep taking it I will die.'"

Figure 1. An example from the *Mirror* (2006), illustrating the composition of crystal meth stories and the relationship between text and image.

One of our key aims, then, was to extend our analysis beyond the usual focus on discourse and consider how newsprint media stories are constructed visually and aesthetically as expressive cultural forms (Ericson et al., 1991). After all, it has long been argued within studies of communication that signification can only be understood by examining both words and pictures used to create myth (Barthes, 1972, 1977). Historically, criminological

concern with media representation has had a fixation on linguistics and language as a mechanism for communicating meaning, rather than the wider semiotics that underscore the construction of stories. Cultural criminologists have addressed this deficit, placing the visual firmly at the centre of their analysis (see, for example, the edited collection by Hayward and Presdee, 2010), including discussions of how photographic representations of offenders are manipulated to shape popular opinion about crime and justice (e.g. McLaughlin and Greer, 2008; Ferrell and Van de Voorde, 2010; Jones and Wardle, 2010). Like those studies, this article aims to give due consideration to the visual dimensions of reporting and seeks to illustrate how photographic images of crystal meth communicate meaning and represent 'reality'.

First though, a brief overview follows of the drug and its effects to try and understand, by way of context, why crystal meth was considered so newsworthy by the UK media.

Crystal Meth Use in the UK and US

Crystal methamphetamine or 'ice' is part of the synthetic³ group of drugs known as amphetamines which stimulate the central nervous system and have been used medicinally and recreationally for decades. Pharmaceutically, methamphetamine is the strongest variety of amphetamine but, when illicitly produced in laboratories, its strength and purity varies and can be as high as 70% (ACMD, 2005; UNODC, 2010). Methamphetamine comes in various purities and forms; tablet (known as 'ya ba' or 'shabu'), powder (called 'pure' or 'crank'), base ('putty' or 'base') and crystal ('ice', 'Tina' or 'glass'). The latter of these forms, crystal meth (dextro-methamphetamine hydrochloride) is a more concentrated form of methamphetamine and has a crystalline appearance, similar to shards of glass or a translucent rock, which is sometimes tinged with green, blue or pink.

Although usually smoked or injected, crystal meth can also be snorted or swallowed. The intensity of the effects is dependent on a number of factors including the purity and method of ingestion. Commonly, it brings on a feeling of exhilaration and a sharpening of focus; a huge rush followed by a feeling of euphoria for anything from 2 to 16 hours. It enhances mood, increases blood pressure and heart rate, heightens energy levels, boosts confidence, promotes disinhibition and sexual arousal, and suppresses appetite. However, after the initial 'high', many users experience anxiety, headaches, teeth grinding, jaw clenching, nausea and paranoia. Regular use not only exacerbates the effects of the drug, but also increases the user's tolerance and, when stopped, induces withdrawal symptoms including severe depression, anxiety, fatigue, insomnia, memory loss, cravings to use the drug, violent and suicidal ideations, hallucinations (including 'meth bugs' crawling under the skin), obsessive behaviour (such as skin picking), paranoia and a schizophrenic type of psychosis known as 'tweaking' (Buxton and Dove, 2008; Weisheit and White, 2009). To avoid the negative effects associated with withdrawal, crystal meth users often binge on the drug, using it for days or even weeks, without break. However, such binges are followed by a 'crash', whereby the negative effects associated with the drug are intensified. Other health problems include weight loss, tooth decay and gum erosion (also known as 'meth mouth'), heart attacks, strokes, organ failure, brain damage and sometimes death (CDCP, 2007; Ministerial Action Group on Drugs, 2003). Finally, crystal meth has been linked to outbursts of violence among those who use it and is

'alleged to stimulate violent behaviour even more sharply than crack [cocaine]' (Jenkins, 1994: 18; see also Cohen et al., 2003).

Comparisons between methamphetamine powder and cocaine are common (it is often referred to as 'poor man's cocaine'), while crystal meth is frequently likened to crack cocaine. Although there are some similarities, crystal meth is cheaper and its effects last up to twelve times longer,⁴ are more intense and produce a stronger 'high' than other forms of methamphetamine (ACMD, 2005; McKetin, Kelly and McLaren, 2006). It is inexpensive; is of a high purity; its effects are long lasting and can easily be achieved by smoking the drug; and compared to other illicit drugs, the supply chain is less arduous. The meth producer is quite often a consumer because crystal meth can easily be made in temporary makeshift laboratories. Instructions for its manufacture are widely available on the Internet; the ingredients are freely available in most over-the-counter decongestant medications that contain ephedrine or pseudo-ephedrine (CDCP, 2007) and are also present in everyday household products.⁵ Given the potential for users to make their own crystal meth in unlimited quantities cheaply and without the risks associated with buying other illicit drugs, it is easy to see why crystal meth is perceived as such a threat and why it is widely recognised as one of the most dangerous illicit drugs currently available. However, comparisons between crystal meth and crack cocaine may also help to explain why the former did not cross the Atlantic and become a problem in the UK as was predicted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it was simply too strong for many users as an alternative to crack cocaine, while drug dealers 'have a vested interest in keeping crystal meth out because it could usher in rival dealers and the drug is far less profitable than crack' (Detective Sergeant Waite cited in Daly, 2007: 6).

Despite the different prevalence rates of crystal meth, the UK and US have similar historical trends and early patterns of use. Like the UK, pharmaceutical amphetamine and methamphetamine were prevalent in America throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Weisheit and White, 2009). The reaction in the US was similar to that in the UK: a plethora of regulations was introduced to control the pharmacological manufacture and distribution of these products in an attempt to curb consumption (ACMD, 2005). The legislation proved largely ineffective, however. Methamphetamine use increased steadily, including the crystalline variety and, in some states, crystal meth production replaced the cannabis trade (Hunt, Kuck and Truitt, 2006; King, 2006; SAMHSA, 2010). The 'map' of crystal meth use in the US is varied, then. Despite exaggerated media reports suggesting the contrary, methamphetamine is a highly localised phenomenon. According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, the states with the highest treatment admissions for crystal meth addiction in 2003 were Hawaii (45%), Idaho (42%) and California (31%), compared with 0.2% in New York and 0.02% in Massachusetts (Hunt et al., 2006). Arrestees testing positive for the drug also vary from state to state, ranging from 0% to 38% (King, 2006). Other evidence indicates that crystal meth use may be popular in certain sub-groups, including clubbers (Degenhardt and Topp, 2003; Maxwell, 2004) and homosexual men (CDCP, 2007; Halkitis, Perry, Parsons and Wilton, 2003). None of the national measures recording the prevalence of drug use indicate a crystal meth 'epidemic', a 'national crystal meth market' (Jenkins, 1994: 10), or even a pervasive problem, as portrayed by the US media.

It would appear, then, that reports in the United States have nationalised a specifically regional picture of meth use. According to Jenkins, this process affords 'rich opportunities to local activists, moral entrepreneurs, or claims makers who wish to draw attention to a particular issue' (1994: 27) and do so by presenting it as more threatening or more salient than is actually warranted.

The process of nationalisation in turn has developed into one of internationalisation as the UK media look to the US to illustrate the scale of the forthcoming crisis and to frame the story:

Crystal Meth Craze comes to Britain via Hollywood (*Independent on Sunday*, 2004)

A dangerous new dance drug has reached the UK ... It has caused devastation in the US where it has taken hold of large sections of the population. (*Mirror*, 2005)

New Menace from America (*Independent on Sunday*, 2006)

How a Non-News Story was Constructed as Newsworthy

Rarely has there been a better example of the old adage 'never let the facts get in the way of a good story' than the media's construction of the 'problem' of crystal meth. For the UK media, reporting of crystal meth was significantly disproportionate to its actual status as a social issue because it is an inherently newsworthy story, conforming to the twelve cardinal news values that have been identified as guaranteeing widespread coverage in the press and other media (Jewkes, 2011b). It meets the required *threshold* of public interest (or at least journalists' perceptions of public interest) and was, as we have already seen, *predictable* in the sense that crystal meth was commonly represented as an invasion from the US like so many crime waves before it, including mugging, car-jacking and gang violence. *Predictability* is also evident in the fact that the social and economic threats posed by crystal meth had already been rehearsed in relation to crack cocaine (another American export), which provided a useful context in which to frame the imagined crystal meth problem. The media emphasised that crystal meth was far more harmful than crack cocaine⁶ and quoted a New York police chief who told the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology that 'crystal meth makes crack cocaine look like a Hershey (chocolate) bar' (*The Times*, 2007). These precedents permitted a *simplification* of the story as it was reduced to yet another menace from the States: alien and un-British. More than that, however, crystal meth has been portrayed as a *risk* not only to habitual drug users, but to everyone, including residents of 'middle England'. The construction of a problem that poses a threat not just to the deviant and dispossessed but to ordinary decent people and the 'British way of life' illustrates the extent to which the popular press relish reporting that the chaos and disorder of the cities is invading the (imaginatively sustained) tranquillity of suburban and village communities (Girling, Loader and Sparks, 2000). The discovery of clandestine meth labs in the Peak District, Derbyshire, and on the Isle of Wight in 2006 lent a powerful impetus to this growing sense of menace:

Crystal meth: Middle England's new crack cocaine? (*Daily Mail*, 2007)

Crystal meth: coming to a town near you (*The Times*, 2007)

In this way the UK media made the American crystal meth problem *proximate*, both spatially (i.e. geographically) and culturally. Individuals will always make sense of global transitions and transformations, including crime and crime control, from within the context and contours of their local community (Girling et al., 2000). But it also follows that the media emphasise and

exaggerate perceived risk of victimization: quite simply, mediated fear of crime becomes substantially more intelligible in the light of a deeper contextual understanding of time and place.

As a consequence of presenting the drug story as simultaneously a local, national and international issue, crystal meth became 'Britain's deadliest drug problem' (*Independent*, 2006) and 'the devil's poison' (*Sun*, 2009b), despite not being identified as a problem by any scientific, policy or crime-measuring organisation. Upping the ante further, stories about the drug appeared in features directed specifically at women ('the drug has already ravaged small towns in the US, where middle-aged women take it in the belief it will help weight loss', *Daily Mail*, 2007) and the press have used *children* to emphasise the tragic consequences of crystal meth addiction, referring to American 'meth orphans' to illustrate their point (see *Daily Mail*, 2007; *Independent on Sunday*, 2006). An article appeared in the *Sunday Times* under the headline 'Children doing drugs is every liberal parent's worst nightmare' (10 February 2008). Written by David Sheff, the report starts with the line 'cautionary tales about my own dabbling with drugs may have fuelled my son's terrifying descent' and goes on to relate the story of the writer's son's addiction to crystal meth, later supplemented with heroin and morphine. Such personalisation of the story underlines the media's inclination to *individualise* news.

In addition, reporting aims to teach transgressors the lesson of individual responsibility, and the opportunity to link drug use with sex – more specifically, sexual promiscuity – provides perfect material for moralising, with references to 'a sub-culture of reckless hedonism' and crystal meth being a 'raging stimulant' and 'disinhibitor that encourages sexual marathons' (e.g. *Daily Mail*, 2007). The inference is clear: individuals' inability to control their own behaviour legitimises state intervention in the form of incarceration or treatment. Sexual promiscuity is also linked to aggressive behaviour among crystal meth users but the news values of *sex* and *violence* are also conflated with that of *celebrity*. For example, a story concerning the late British actor Dudley Moore describe him as 'depressed, drug addled and violent' under the headline 'Cuddly Dudley forced last wife to dance semi-nude' (*Sunday Times*, 2009). The fact that the press have succeeded in linking famous names – among them, the musicians Rufus Wainwright, Rick James and Fergie, sports star Andre Agassi and actors River Phoenix, Tom Sizemore and Cameron Douglas – to the drug also illustrates the extent to which 'celebrity' defines modern media reporting. It underlines that those who work in the news industries are especially drawn to stories that unite celebrity with sexual deviance and violence because they provide a titillating juxtaposition of high life and low life for an audience who, it is assumed, lead conservative, conventional, law-abiding 'mid-lives' (Barak, 1994).

However, reports that high-profile stars were using crystal meth also posed a dilemma for the news media because these glamorous celebrities leading desirable lives are antithetical to the drug-ravaged and deformed individuals depicted in the US police mugshots that were being extensively used by the UK press to illustrate the dangers of crystal meth use (see Figure 2). News that Andre Agassi took crystal meth during his tennis career and exhibited many of the classic symptoms associated with its use caused a few shockwaves in the tennis world and among his fans, and, while elements of the popular press heaped disapproval on Agassi, other news titles saved their opprobrium for the sport's governing body, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), for not being more diligent in its drug testing procedures (*Guardian*, 2009). The fact that Agassi was able to continue his professional career, appearing on television numerous times, playing and being interviewed without arousing suspicion, suggests a different impact of usage than was commonly being portrayed. Quite simply, Agassi did not look like a crystal meth user.

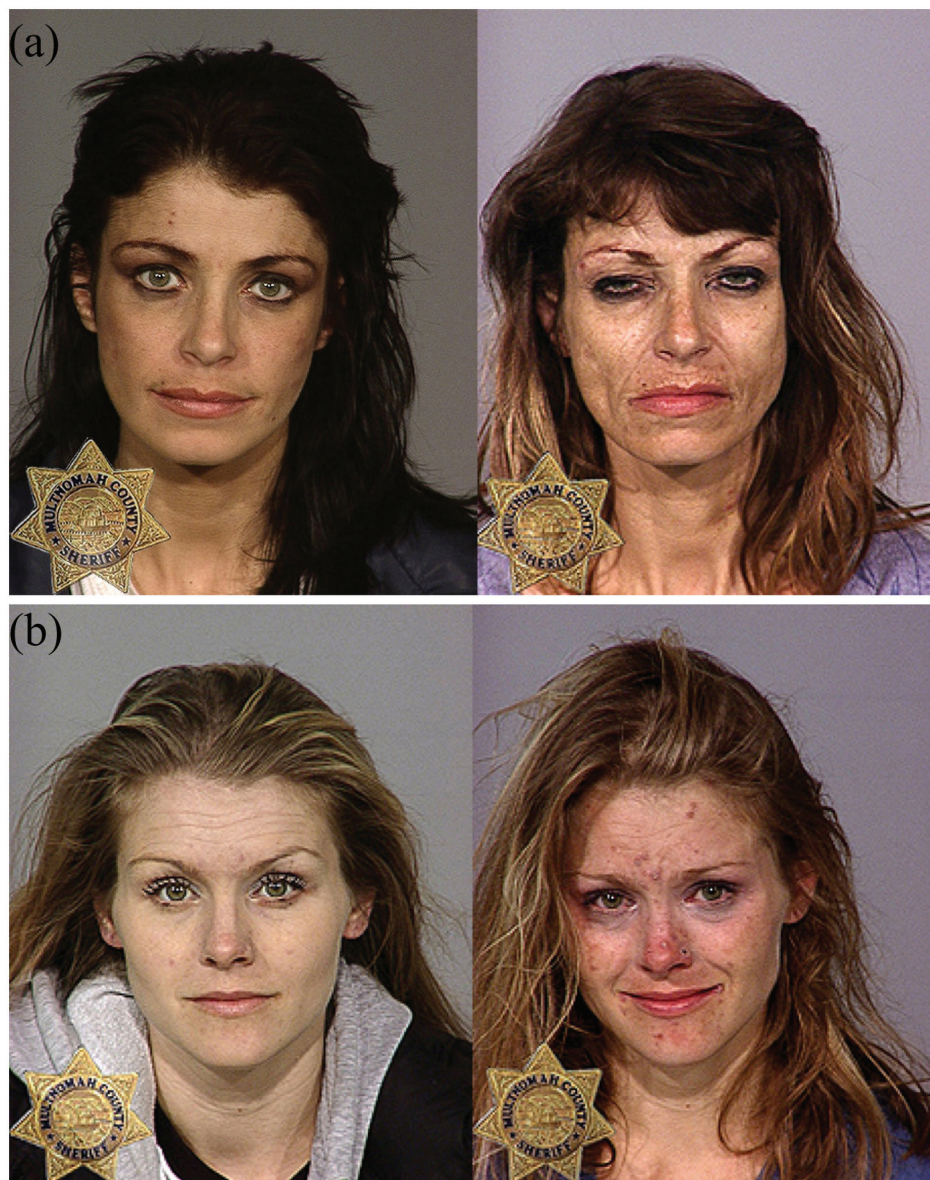


Figure 2. Two examples of the before-and-after mugshots used to depict crystal meth users in the 'Drugs to Mugs' stories, which appeared in the *Daily Mail* (2011), *Sun* (2011b) and *Telegraph* (2011).

Visual Representation: Commercialism and Ideology

Here, then, we repeat our initial suggestion that it is in the realm of the visual that meaning is most immediately and powerfully conveyed. The brief overview above of the kinds of themes underpinning news discourse illustrates the extent to which even a manufactured story can be constructed as inherently newsworthy. It is, however, *graphic imagery* that most directly

communicates the intended message. As Barthes (1972: 110) observed (and Stuart Hall, 1973, has reiterated) 'pictures ... are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analysing or diluting it'.

Beyond the obvious fact that photographic representations appear to provide evidential confirmation of what is being discussed in the text, there are two salient reasons why visually arresting images are so important to modern news media. The first is commercial. Greer, Ferrell and Jewkes (2007) note that the proliferation of news and entertainment media has generated growing competition for audience attention and market share, and graphic (in both senses of the word) imagery constitutes a 'sort of inflationary spiral of shock and enticement' designed to sustain commercial buoyancy (Greer et al., 2007: 5). Given that the UK news media did not have images showing the damaging effects of crystal meth use within a local context, they used police mugshots from the US in their bid to shock and entice. Lurid 'before and after' pictures showing the effects of taking crystal meth were reproduced in 16% of the news reports sampled, an exact analogy of the images designed to shock that are now incorporated on many tobacco products. The photographs on cigarette packets showing the damaging effects of nicotine are ostensibly designed to act as a visual deterrent and it might be suggested that the depictions of crystal meth reproduced in the newspapers have a similar intention. However, it might equally be argued that semiotically the graphic images pertaining to both legal and illegal narcotics powerfully communicate their malefic influence, connoting the unclean and polluted body, and creating a form of symbolic boundary-maintenance. The message is clear: 'users' contaminate communities and in any 'decent' society they constitute 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 1966: 36):

The pushing underground of such drug using communities enables the media to invent the role of subcultural body snatcher: relocate these deviant bodies ... and exhume their remainder for public dissection (keep your distance from the contagion) (Giulianotti, 1997: 414).

This brings us to the second reason why visual representations are so important: the image is ideological. In *Image, Music, Text*, Roland Barthes (1977) provided the definitive explanation of how photographic images are interpreted, observing that images work both denotatively ('naturally' depicting real events) and connotatively (drawing on broad symbolic systems and shared codes of meaning). It is important, then, to understand the messages conveyed via the image, not just at a basic descriptive level, but also at the level of secondary signification or connotation. News photos promote a hegemonic ideology that serves to maintain the status quo and enforce the dominant social order. Photography has always demarcated the worthy from the unworthy and created a social and moral hierarchy of the socially desirable and undesirable (Fyfe and Law, 1988). The use of the photographic image as a means of documentation and administration by social institutions, including the medical profession and law enforcement agencies, has resulted in it becoming a repressive tool to exemplify 'the poor, the diseased, the insane, the criminal, the non-white, the female, and all other embodiments of the unworthy' (Sekula, 1989: 347). From the rogue galleries of the 19th century to the mugshots of crystal meth users printed on the pages of 21st-century newspapers, photographs have recorded the criminal individual as a subject of the state and facilitated state surveillance of the body. The photograph makes these groups socially visible, individually identified, separated and sequestered, categorised and, if necessary, regulated or removed (Foucault, 1977). Further, due to the

largely covert nature of illegal drug use, images provide a visual representation of an invisible but omnipresent social activity. They perform a scopophilic function, permitting non-drug-using citizens to see for themselves the dangers of drugs, thus supporting the ideological war on drugs, and simultaneously encouraging both censoriousness and voyeurism. The photographic images that accompany news reports about an impending crystal meth epidemic that never came to pass are an exemplary case of what Hall refers to as 'a double movement within ideological discourse: the movement towards propaganda and the movement towards myth' (Hall, 1973: 241). Imagery is thus never value-neutral or simply an accompaniment to the text but is always an intrinsic and inextricable part of the media's representation.

As a brief but important aside, in our sample, both broadsheets and populist 'red tops' used the same stigmatizing photos in their reports; for example, coverage of the education campaign film *From Drugs to Mugs* (a follow-up to the 2004 'Faces of Meth' campaign) included images that appeared in the *Sun* (25 February 2011), the *Daily Mail* (25 February 2011) and the *Telegraph* (24 February 2011), thus problematising Huxford's (2001) observation that the type of newspaper contextually affects the symbolism of the photograph. In the realm of drug reporting it appears that the majority of the British press speak with one (condemnatory) voice, especially following the atypical drug-related death of a young person from a respectable, middle-class family in which case, in ideological terms, both the deceased and their immediate family are signified as victims, an interpretation often connotatively amplified by photographic images (Hall, 1973). In general, however, drug users do not make ideal(ised) victims and therefore do not garner much sympathetic coverage in any of the media. The photos in our sample of news stories individually and collectively embody the ideology of the outsider, with all the connotations of uncleanness and strangeness that the term implies.

As Hall (1973) observes, news photos appear 'natural' in the sense of offering themselves as literal visual transcriptions of the 'real world' – a sense that 'this event really happened and here is visual proof of it', which is why many people, having witnessed a noteworthy event such as a crime or accident, will immediately turn to the media as if to seek verification that it did happen and to get an 'official' take on the event they witnessed. Image encourages the spectator to affix authorised, privileged meaning to the text and vice versa, thus removing subjective interpretation and enforcing hegemony through visual representation. The image provides irrefutable evidence that both the story and the official discourse framing the story (in this case, that crystal meth is a scourge that must be eradicated, a contagion that needs to be stopped) is true. Even when a story constitutes an extreme version of reality, a misrepresentation of the facts, or a complete fabrication, images such as those of the raddled body and damaged facial features of the drug user 'prove' that this representation exists and that the story is valid (Hall, 1973; Huxford, 2001). The visual, then, lends powerful weight not only to the 'reality' of a problem but also to the legitimization of punitive state intervention into increasingly diverse spheres of its citizen's private lives.

The Face of Crystal Meth as a Driver of Drug Policy and Legislation

Beyond uniting the press in pejorative reporting, drug use is also one of the most clear-cut examples of the symbiotic relationship between media and policy-makers. BBC Home Affairs

correspondent turned academic, Jon Silverman, goes as far as to state that 'over the past decade, a small number of newspaper editors have acted as a policy "satnav", which ministers have followed almost slavishly in their desire to send "messages", with the outcome that drug classification has become ludicrously detached from drug harm' (Silverman, 2010: 31). In addition, drugs are frequently presented homogeneously with very little balanced, informed or nuanced reporting of the distinctions and dissimilarities between different substances. Silverman's commentary suggests that the media's framing of 'hard' drugs such as crystal meth influences policy discussions about *all* drugs and his analysis centres on responses to three substances at the lower end of the 'dangerousness' spectrum: mephedrone (or 'meow meow'), ecstasy and the form of cannabis known as 'skunk'.

Specifically, in relation to each in turn, Silverman notes first that the UK Labour Government's desire to place prohibition of the 'legal high' mephedrone on the statute books before a forthcoming general election was prompted by press headlines including 'The "death" drug we can't police' (*Daily Mail*, 2010b) and 'Police reveal 180 pupils at one school off sick after taking legal "Meow Meow" party drug' (*Daily Mail*, 2010c). Second, Professor David Nutt, then Chair of the ACMD Technical Committee, was publicly vilified and dismissed from his post by then Home Secretary Alan Johnson, when he tried to put into context the risks inherent in ecstasy by comparing deaths from the drug with those from horse-riding, in a paper for the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* (initially picked up by the *Telegraph* and then reported across the popular press which, among other unflattering descriptions, referred to Professor Nutt as 'that ninny-brained menace to the nation's young people', *Mail On Sunday*, 2009). Nutt's intervention was entirely 'off message' to a government fearful of the political repercussions of the death in April 2009 of Hester Stewart, an attractive middle-class teenager from a 'respectable' background, which recalled the death of Leah Betts more than a decade earlier (Manning, 2006). Third, Silverman notes that, following press reporting of an increase in production and usage of skunk, a home-grown form of cannabis with a high THC content, the government reclassified cannabis as a Class B drug, reacting instinctively to headlines that were amusing or alarming depending on your point of view:

What will Britain be like when there's a whole generation hearing voices in their heads? (*Mail on Sunday*, 2004)

Against this backdrop, the media's desire to fuel fear concerning an imminent new drug epidemic can be seen as part of a much broader moral crusade with its roots in previous crusades such as the American prohibition movement of 1900–1920 (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994). The tendency to use certain drugs as exemplars to illustrate the dangers of all narcotics also appears to shape public perceptions. Audience feedback from social networking sites and Internet forums illustrates that many readers failed to understand that the mugshot images of crystal meth users do not pertain to drug users in general. For example, a Twitter stream⁷ generated from the *Telegraph's* coverage of the campaign 'From Drugs to Mugs' includes comments such as: 'One of the unfortunate effects of taking hard drugs' and 'Some astonishing before and after photos of regular drug users'. Similarly, readers' comments from the *Daily Mail* online, under a story headed 'From drugs to mugs: Shocking before and after photos show how drug addiction takes devastating toll on faces of users' (25 February 2011) include:

Folks ... Do not miss the statement: "'Everyone experiments at college or school and I want From Drugs to Mugs to show kids that everyone in those pictures started on cannabis, they didn't just dive head first into heroin,'" said Deputy King.' Marijuana IS a gateway drug. It leads to many other things. It is not the harmless drug people would like you to believe!

The explicit conflation of cannabis, heroin and crystal meth in this extract quotes a statement by Deputy Sheriff of Multnomah County in Oregon and echoes the official stance that *all* illicit drugs are harmful and worthy of prohibition.

The composition of stories on some newspaper pages in our sample also underlined the impression that all drugs are essentially the same. Overall, composition was less of a factor than was anticipated, largely because, in many cases, the story about crystal meth took up a whole page (especially where there were accompanying images). However, we did find that, in some newspapers, reports about different substances were juxtaposed on the same page. For example, the *Independent on Sunday* (2006: 23) contained a headline: 'Drug Policy: New Menace from America'. The story occupying the top half of the page is headlined 'Law to target crystal meth, more potent than deadly crack', accompanied by a picture of the drug. Below is another story about crystal meth headed: 'From battle to the street: the uses of meth', accompanied by a small picture of the equipment needed to make crystal meth (which curiously also includes a gun). On the other side of the page is a report headed 'Blunkett tells Blair: don't tighten law on cannabis'. To take another example, the *Mirror* (2006: 15; see Figure 1) consists of two main stories, both drug-related. The first carries the headline: 'Don't Be Dopey' with an accompanying photograph of a woman smoking a spliff (cannabis cigarette). Beneath is a story titled 'Your Face is a Meth', illustrating the harm of crystal meth use. In addition, this page carries four smaller reports: one about a disqualified driver fleeing a crash scene; one concerning the Chinese government's censorship of the Rolling Stones' 'sexy lyrics' as the band prepared to tour there; one headed 'Pervert Jobs War' about the imposition of jail terms for those employing paedophiles to work with children; and one about measures to tackle avian flu. In both these examples, then, stories about crystal meth and cannabis are amalgamated into one generic category and there is a distinctive moral slant to the composition, with a subtle emphasis on otherness, sexuality, disease, danger and death. Read semiotically, these are all part of the same ideological message which is organised in associative fields (Barthes, 1977). Cannabis is but the thin end of the wedge, a dangerous substance that leads users on an inevitable path to ruin. The press presents quite different drugs collectively and homogeneously, accompanied by a ready supply of images of crystal meth users obtained from US police departments. In this way, the images of crystal meth have become part of the general spectacle of drug use: 'the new face of addiction' (*The Times*, 2006).

The crystal meth user as the 'face of addiction' is particularly apt because of the prominence of the face in press coverage. This focus is in contrast to previous media reporting that has followed government campaigns and centred on the body (for example, the images used in the 1980s 'heroin screws you up' campaign fixed on the emaciated bodies of users). The close-up images of faces damaged by crystal meth use not only encourage the audience to connotatively grasp the ideological concepts embodied in them ('druggies', 'ugliness', 'infection', and so on) but is, as Carney describes, a 'new form of brand or mark, a punitive exposure by image' (Carney, 2010: 24). By utilising police mugshots, not only is the crystal meth user's criminality emphasised, but their face becomes a spectacle for public display and humiliation and serves as a deterrent to

others in the dynamic struggle for power and social control in the war against drugs. The addict's mugshot provides emphatic proof of spoiled and damaged identity, objectifying the criminal body as a site for the exercise of sovereign power and knowledge (Foucault, 1977). From the ancient practice of mounting the heads of slain combatants, transgressors and traitors on pikes, to modern-day global media footage of executed leaders such as Osama bin Laden and Muammar Gaddafi, it is the close-up image of the face that provides irrefutable evidence of their demise and encourages public condemnation, ridicule and stigmatisation. In a similar way, the drug addict has become publicly branded. Yes, we are invited to gawp at the image, but we also actively participate in its forces, bringing to it our own desires, social practices and entrenched prejudices (Carney, 2010).

The relationship between image and spectator is thus a dynamic one. The creation of spectacle is dependent on the viewer who ascribes meaning to it: 'the spectator completes the picture' (Hall, 1997: 60). Whereas processing written text requires mental effort, a visual image can be 'read' instantaneously. Like the subjects of all full-face police mugshots, the familiar images of crystal meth users might be read as defiant, challenging the viewer to judge them. The subject stares at the spectator, and they 'exchange looks' (Walker and Chaplin, 1997). But the image encourages the viewer to draw simplistic conclusions, to form easy judgements about the subject which, while logical in construction, may be entirely erroneous (Jones and Wardle, 2010). These are 'cultural typifications' (Gruenewald, Chermak and Pizarro, 2011), not contextualised human beings with complex lives, families, occupations, aspirations and futures; they are simply drug addicts. Furthermore, by presenting a 'simulacrum' of drug use (Baudrillard, 1994), an oversimplified, distorted, representation that stands in for a more complex reality, mugshots are intended to induce public ridicule and revulsion, engender social conformity and legitimise state intervention. Debord comments: 'Where the real world changes into simple images, the simple images become real beings and effective motivations of hypnotic behaviour' (1967: section 18).

In the case of crystal meth, 'hypnotic behaviour' is located not only in the spectator's reaction but is a fitting description of the knee-jerk policy and legislation response to the perceived problem. Following initial erroneous, distorted and sensationalist reporting, crystal meth was upgraded in the UK from a Class B to Class A drug in 2007 (after the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs reviewed its original decision not to upgrade methamphetamine). This reclassification came after much lobbying from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), who not only discussed the threat posed by the drug at their annual conference, but also created a national methamphetamine working group. As with other drugs, such as mephedrone, media reporting set the public and policy agendas on crystal meth, restricting the possibility for alternative dialogue and progressive, sensible law-making.

Silverman (2010: 36) poses the question 'Why have some newspapers had such a strong impact on drugs policy?' and answers it by quoting former Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire Police, Tom Lloyd: 'Unlike transport, health or education, drugs have attained the status of being about morality. You are immoral not only if you take drugs but also if you argue against the drugs laws. It's almost a religious thing.' The element of 'moral crusade' that is intrinsic to media reporting of crystal meth supports political rhetoric about the 'war on drugs', engenders social conformity by illustrating the dire consequences (physical as well as punitive) for those who fail to heed the message, and constructs the drug user as the enemy within, a parasite who threatens to infect the masses. Thus, despite calls from many academic and policy experts

across the drugs field (see inter alia Professor David Nutt in the *Guardian*, 2010; Buchanan, 2010; Stevens, 2011) there is still a refusal to take a realist stance to drugs and drug policy. Instead, successive UK governments continue to create reactive policies using the media as a tool for propaganda. The press has become the new battleground for the war on drugs: as Coomber has sardonically observed, 'if drugs could sue for misrepresentation, defamation and libel then they would' (1996, cited in Coomber, Morris and Dunn, 2000: 217).

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that crystal meth represents a unique story. While a small number of studies exist concerning media representations of crystal meth, analysis has been exclusively limited to countries that are experiencing a problem with the drug (Boyd and Carter, 2010; Jenkins, 1994). In contrast, we have discussed the representation of crystal meth in the UK, a country *without* a crystal meth problem. There is also a limited body of literature devoted to what might be characterised as the non-construction of actual problems; issues that have failed to generate panics, despite appearing to fulfil all the classic criteria (Jenkins, 2009). Yet crystal meth might be better understood as the actual construction of a non-problem and, in discussing the coverage of this non-story, we have sought to demonstrate that, even when use of a particular substance has not been identified on any significant scale, the existence of a problem in other countries (particularly the US) can be sufficient to invoke a looming crisis and incite an overblown response.

The article has further sought to illustrate that drug use is an inherently newsworthy story and that media portrayals of drugs perpetuate distorted and stereotypical preconceptions premised on the most extreme and atypical cases, which in turn impede the possibility for alternative dialogue and discourse, restrict progressive and sensible evidence-based policy-making and legitimise authoritarian, punitive and disproportionate intervention. It is, as Stuart Hall observed nearly 40 years ago, this double articulation – formal news values/ideological treatment – which 'binds the inner discourse of the newspaper to the ideological universe of the society' (Hall, 1973: 234). Four decades on, the use of graphic visual images is far more pervasive in the 24-hour, global, technology-driven, mobile, multi-mediascape and is even more significant in communicating the message and manipulating meaning; as Greer et al. comment, 'the visual constitutes perhaps the central medium through which the meanings and emotions of crime are captured and conveyed to audiences' (2007: 5). The photographs of the ravaging effects of crystal meth use examined in this study illustrate the extent to which the power of spectacle captures emotion, subjugates identities to a master status of 'the drug addict', connotes infection and disease, and permits the subject to be surveilled and sequestered.

There remains a strange incongruity between the image presented in the print media and the reality of crystal meth use in the UK. The spectacle of the crystal meth addict in this country has only occurred at a symbolic level, a spectacle manufactured, generated and revealed on the pages of the press like so many media-created myths before it (see, for example, Cohen and Young, 1973; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke and Roberts, 1978). The reality has become lost in the visual representation, and a hyper-reality of crystal meth use has been constructed in order to distract people from the veracity of social life and from more urgent socio-political issues. The haunting spectacle of crystal meth has become a central aspect of social order and culture; a 'permanent opium war' (Debord, 1967: section 44) and an instigator of change. The media no longer provide

representations of reality; they 'affect and produce the reality that they mediate' (Fiske, 1994: xv). In relation to drugs, they resort to 'proving the real by the imaginary; proving truth by scandal' (Baudrillard, 1983: 36).

Finally, our analysis of the visual images that frame drug stories illustrates the extent to which criminal policy is cultural policy and vice versa. In analysing a particular case study we hope to have demonstrated that, for criminologists interested in media representations and 'meaning', the photographs accompanying the stories are at least as important as the written text. Visual images provide us with 'data' not necessarily available in other forms of representation, and facilitate a more nuanced level of critical analysis and theorising. By focusing on the visual, we have established that crystal meth in the UK has occurred only at a symbolic level; a visible sign of a problem that does not exist. Premised on historical antecedents and the conventional demonology used to frame drugs and drug users, the UK media have succeeded in creating their own folklore of a drug-crime-scare-that-never-was.

Notes

A shorter version of this article was presented at a *Crime, Media, Culture* panel at the Australian & New Zealand Society of Criminology conference in Geelong, Australia, 30 September 2011. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the British Academy and the College of Social Sciences, University of Leicester which enabled them to attend. The authors also thank James Treadwell for his invaluable ideas and input at an early stage of writing.

1. Or, more accurately, *certain* drugs and drug users. As Manning (2006) notes, sniffing glue, lighter fuel and aerosol gases, despite being more widespread and potentially more harmful than other substances, are not considered newsworthy and consequently have received little coverage in popular media.
2. As Greer et al. (2007: 6) put it: 'Reduced to words on a computer monitor, printed "news" becomes decontextualized, shorn of structure and style, disconnected from defining images and surrounding stories – and so, ultimately, left with little similarity to the increasingly spectacular, brilliantly colourful products that media audiences consume on a daily basis.'
3. Synthesised or synthetic drugs are artificially produced using precursor chemicals in laboratories (Ministerial Action Group on Drugs, 2003).
4. Crystal meth has a half-life of twelve hours. Half-life refers to the 'amount of time necessary for half the drug to be metabolised' (CDCP, 2007: 3). It also has a longer-lasting rush and a prolonged 'high' of hours, as opposed to crack, which has a high lasting minutes.
5. For example, the red phosphorus used to transform ephedrine into methamphetamine can be obtained from matchboxes (ACMD, 2005).
6. Among the many headlines emphasising this fact were: 'Creeping Menace of Crystal Meth, the Drug more Dangerous than Crack' (*Guardian*, 2005); 'The drug more addictive than crack' (*Daily Mail*, 2005); 'Law to target crystal meth, more potent and deadly than crack' (*Independent on Sunday*, 2006); 'A Menace that's Crystal Clear: As a Drug more Dangerous than Crack Hits Britain' (*Telegraph*, 2008).
7. http://topsy.com/www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthpicturegalleries/8345461/From-Drugs-to-Mugs-Shocking-before-and-after-images-show-the-cost-of-drug-addiction.html?allow_lang=en

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