Studies Show Huge Drop in Meth Use Among Gay Men in NYC

January 11, 2010 By Peter Staley

We did it! In 2004, gay men in New York City decided to confront what had been our dirty little secret up until then -- crystal meth had become our party-drug du jour.

We forced the city council to appropriate funds for anti-meth campaigns designed by our own community groups (like the one pictured here). We held packed community forums to discuss what the drug was doing to us. And most importantly, we started talking to each other honestly about the downsides of Tina. We helped those among us whose lives were being destroyed -- getting them into treatment, begging them to stop, and caring for each other much as we did during the darkest days of the AIDS crisis.

I've been waiting for many years for some good science that would show if any of this helped. Did we start to turn away frommeth in 2004 and the years that followed? The study results I've been most anticipating are finally trickling out.

The CDC started the National HIV Behavioral Surveillance (NHBS) system in 2003. This system keeps an eye on behaviors known to spread HIV, surveying MSM ("men who have sex with men," i.e. gay men), IV drug users, and heterosexuals living in areas with a high rate of AIDS. They did the first survey of gay men in 2004 (November 2003 to April 2005, to be exact), and found that in New York City, 14% reported using meth within the last 12 months.

The CDC finally ran NHBS-MSM2 in 2008, their second survey of gay men, using the same techniques as their first survey, thus allowing researchers to look at trends over time. Meth use stats for individual cities have yet to be published, but I contacted the principal investigators in New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco to get their new numbers, and was pleasantly surprised.

In 2008, only 6% of gay men in New York City reported using meth during the previous 12 months. That's a 57% drop from the percentage reported in 2004.

There was a similar drop in San Francisco, which ran many of the same meth prevention campaigns designed for New York City. They reported a meth use rate of 13% in 2008, dropping from 22% in 2004. Los Angeles still has work to do, with a much smaller drop -- 13% of gay men reported using meth in 2008, vs. 16% in 2004. Meth will always be a local battle, and each community's response, or lack thereof, can affect local use.

For gay men in New York City, we responded loudly and convincingly when the worst of this crisis hit, and now we have some evidence showing it worked. I remain deeply proud to be part of a community that so lovingly takes care of its own.

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