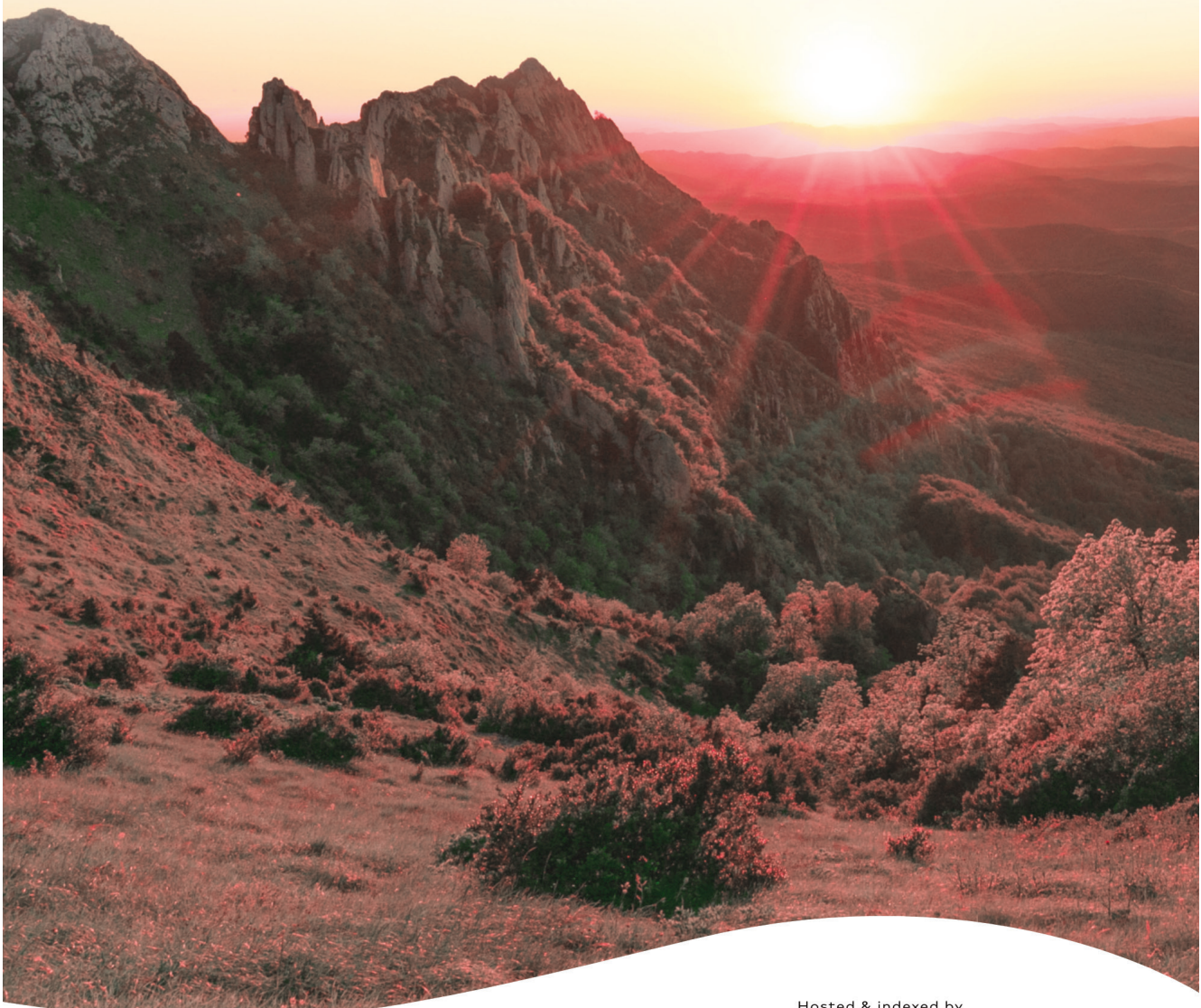


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## Crystal meth in Zimbabwe –unemployment, stress & mental health linkages

R. G. Cooper<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

Crystal meth is a highly addictive drug with adverse short- and long-term health effects. The usage thereof in Zimbabwe, a developing country, has been linked to unemployment, stress and mental health. Pertinent journal articles and selected anonymous individuals referred and suggested by local treatment centres and mental health facilities were included. Of concern is the lack of medication to treat the addiction, via enhanced dopamine levels in the brain. Instead, there is a reliance on behavioural therapy. Usage of this drug may be linked to other affordable sources like cough syrup and glue, in addition to marijuana. There is an urgent need for health care providers together with government support in conjunction with the police to stem the tide of this drug misuse, and prosecute smugglers, producers, users and other offenders.

**KEYWORDS:** drug, crystal meth, unemployment, stress, mental health, Zimbabwe



## **Introduction**

Street talk and interviews have revealed a huge illegal substance misuse epidemic in Zimbabwe. This became especially significant during the coronavirus lockdown and examples of drugs, including home-made substances, were discussed (Mukwenha, 2021), with idleness, unemployment, homelessness, stress and family conflict been significant precipitating factors.

As previously investigated, mental health is often linked to excessive alcohol and tobacco use among marginalised communities in the diaspora (Cooper & Khan, 2007; Cooper, 2009 i & ii) including groups isolated in hugely populated countries (Cooper, 2010). In addition to the voluminous consumption of over-the counter codeine-containing cough syrup (an opioid used to treat mild to moderate pain and attenuate coughing), the scourge of crystal meth stains many suburbs in the country. Crystal meth (C<sub>10</sub>H<sub>15</sub>N, N-methyl-1-phenylpropan-2-amine), colloquially called 'ice', 'tina' or 'glass', is a colourless form of d-methamphetamine that is a powerful and highly addictive central nervous system stimulant. Its illegal use is principally as a recreational drug, although it is occasionally used as a second-line treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and obesity. In a country with an attenuated GDP (2.70% in 2023 vs. 8.47% in 2021, Trading Economics Macrotrends) and low prospect of regularly paid employment (unemployment rate of 16.9%, World Bank, 2023) and health treatment, including drug rehabilitation, many youths have resorted to, and become addicted to illegal highs. The aim of this paper was to evaluate the abuse of crystal meth, a highly-addictive drug, and link it to predisposing factors within Zimbabwe, the formerly-known agricultural bread-basket of Africa.

## **Method**

Sources of literature for this write-up included anonymous, verbal, non-recorded interviews of agreeable anonymous individuals referred to local treatment centres and mental health facilities, in addition to library archives including pertinent journal articles. The linkage of drug abuse, including crystal meth, to unemployment, stress and mental health, was included. Sources specific to Zimbabwe were scarce at the time of writing.

## Results

According to NIDA (2019), methamphetamine presents as a white, bitter-tasting powder or pill, appearing like glass fragments or shiny, bluish-white rocks, and is taken via smoking, swallowing, snorting or injecting. It is a stimulant drug chemically similar to amphetamine, and a drug that is used to treat ADHD and narcolepsy. It increases dopamine levels in the brain and reinforces rewarding behaviours. Short-term health effects (wakefulness and physical activity, decreased appetite, raised blood pressure and increased body temperature) and long-term health predispositions (addiction risk, contraction of HIV and hepatitis, severe dental problems, intense itching and ulceration from scratching, violent behaviour and paranoia), are significant. The drug is addictive that when people stop taking it, intense withdrawal symptoms predominate including anxiety, fatigue, severe depression, psychosis and intense drug cravings. Second-hand exposure may potentially cause adverse health effects. Overdosing is possible leading to a stroke, heart attack or organ problems. The most effective treatment for addiction is behavioural therapies and there are currently no government-approved medications available globally to treat methamphetamine addiction.

Globally, crystal meth usage resurged and escalated during the coronavirus lock down, and Southern Africa was no exception. In The Czech Republic, controversial economic and political strategies were implemented, much to the chagrin of the population, as they argue the drug has severely impacted Czech culture. Indeed, it has overwhelmed public services and led to high crime rates. The government has embarked on a harm reduction strategy, by reforming drug culture and targeting youths in schools and festivals, in order to ensure the next generation is free of the addiction. It plans to reduce the availability of drugs for the under 18-year-olds by minimising underage drinking, gambling and smoking. Nationally, youth and sports have been used to coordinate prevention activities in the school system. The programmes locate high risk families in poor areas, as economic hardship is associated with increased use of this drug. In drug treatment centres, users are offered support and inpatient detoxification treatment that aids the horrendous withdrawal process. Police intervention provides deterrence in schools and at festivals. Music festival revellers often wish to dance repetitively without growing tired, hence encouraging the taking of crystal meth and other stimulants. Harm reduction strategies include where one can test the drugs, obtain information about the drug and seek medical advice. The cost of drug related rehabilitation, however, is extremely expensive rising to €52.9 million in 2015 (Brown, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

As crystal meth is highly addictive, by increasing dopamine levels in the brain, it is categorised as a class A drug in Britain with the harshest of penalties. Easy to take (smoking, swallowing, snorting or injecting), it has adverse short term (e.g. increased wakefulness) and long-term effects (e.g. changes in brain structure and function) on the body. By rapidly releasing dopamine in the reward areas of the brain, it strongly reinforces repetitive drug taking.

There is evidence that people who inhale second-hand smoke of this drug, test positive for it, although it is unknown if people suffer adverse health effects (NIDA, 2019). Continued use alters the brain's dopamine concentrations leading to attenuated coordination and impaired verbal learning. Adverse long-term impacts on emotion and memory, lead to cognitive problems (Volkow et al., 2001). Some changes are irreversible (Wang et al., 2004), although a study demonstrated the accentuated risk of developing Parkinson's disease (Curtin et al., 2015). There is, therefore, an urgent need for health care providers together with fully-funded government support strategies, in conjunction with the police and customs officials, to stem the tide of this drug misuse, and prosecute smugglers, producers, users and other offenders. Although expensive, more, highly regulated and ethically-approved anaesthetised rat models could possibly be used to further determine the adverse effects of this toxic drug on the anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of an individual. Similar studies have been completed in rats (Cooper, 2007, 2008; Cooper and Musabayane, 1999, 2000; Cooper et al., 1997; Cooper, Osim and Musabayane, 1997; Musabayane et al., 1999, 2000i & ii; Prasada Rao, Cooper and Musabayane, 1999).

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## **Conflict of interest**

None in any form whatsoever is/was recorded.

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