

Experts caution against rush to judgment on meth

by [Elizabeth Stawicki](#), Minnesota Public Radio
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These children were in foster care in 2004, because their mother was addicted to methamphetamine. (MPR file photo)

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- Dr. Barry Lester, addiction expert

Two national experts are urging the public to use caution in reacting to methamphetamine. While it is highly addictive they say, getting off the drug is not hopeless. They base that message on the experience of crack cocaine.

St. Paul, Minn. — In the 1980s, the nation rushed to judgment that breaking a crack cocaine addiction was nearly insurmountable. Early studies said treatment didn't work and babies born of crack addicted mothers were scarred for life.

But later research showed there was hope; treatment could work and addicts could recover. The experts say that could be true for meth.

A Minnesota Supreme Court task force on chemical dependency invited two national experts to talk about the latest research on methamphetamine use. Meth is a drug problem in Minnesota, particularly in rural areas.

Dr. Timothy Condon, deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, says meth is a very dangerous drug because it essentially hijacks the brain's circuits. It can cause strokes, paranoia, and memory loss. But he says addicts can recover from meth.

"There is treatment for those who become addicted. It's not a hopeless case," says Condon. "In fact, we have a lot of science now that explains how meth is working and helps people get into treatment."

One of the major concerns about crack cocaine was its effect on fetuses. Early studies said children born of crack-addicted mothers were doomed to major

developmental problems. But another expert who testified before the task force says those studies were faulty.

Dr. Barry Lester directs Brown University's Center for the Study of Children at Risk and Infant Development Center, and is a national expert on prenatal exposure to cocaine. He says later research found that while crack-addicted babies did suffer problems, there weren't necessarily life-long or as severe as earlier predicted.

Similarly, he says, the public should not rush to judgment about babies born to meth-addicted women.

"The country overreacted to cocaine, and now we seem to be overreacting to methamphetamine with very little knowledge out there," says Lester.

Lester says it's vital that the public wait for solid results on how meth affects babies before making public policy decisions. He says early overreaction to crack-addicted babies led to laws that he says broke up families unnecessarily.

In 1997, Congress passed a law which gave drug-addicted parents about a year to kick their habits or lose permanent custody of their children. In Minnesota, these same parents have six months if their children are under 8 years old.

Lester says the presumption was if a mother couldn't break her crack addiction in six months or even one year, treatment would never work. But he says that's not true for everyone.

"You have to understand that addiction is tough; that the women have to stay in treatment; that they're going to relapse," says Lester. "But that's a much better potential long-term outcome, because you will keep families together and you can reunify the baby with the biological mother."

Ramsey County Judge Joanne Smith heads the task force. She also runs a drug court. Drug courts divert addicts into treatment rather than put them in jail. Smith says most people think that getting an addict into treatment as soon as possible is always best. But many meth addicts aren't ready to accept treatment for at least a month.

Experts say meth addicts are so physically exhausted, they spend weeks sleeping before treatment can even begin. Yet the clock is ticking on the six-month deadline before they lose custody of their children.

"The policy implications of that -- with children and mothers in dependency court -- creates a real different issue here," says Smith. "Because we have the permanency guidelines we're operating by. But if people can't really benefit from treatment, are we really setting them up to fail?"

Judge Smith says she's seen success with mothers addicted to methamphetamine. In one case, she said a mother was reunited with her child, and has been off meth for two years.