

# AN INSIGHT INTO THE FROZEN WORLD: EXPLORING PATTERNS OF USE OF ICE/CRYSTAL METH IN PESHAWAR, PAKISTAN

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the patterns of use of Ice (or Crystal Meth) in the males and females of district Peshawar, Pakistan.

**Materials and Methods:** This qualitative study uses a phenomenology approach to develop an understanding of processes and themes, which explains the perceptions of active methamphetamine users. Total thirty individual in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted from March 2019 till August 2019 in district Peshawar, including both male and female participants recruited through purposive sampling.

**Results:** Four themes that emerged from the responses of research participants were:

*Beginning of the end - from recreation to habituation; indicating the factors associated with the initiation of use of Ice*

*Dynamics of Ice or crystal meth - lost into the fog; indicating both positive and negative health dynamics due to Ice use*

*Ice or crystal meth - a contagious social virus; indicating epidemic of Ice or crystal meth in society and its effect on social life*

*Breaking through the wall; indicating both facilitators and barriers to the cessation of use of Ice or crystal meth and need for intervention.*

**Conclusion:** Ice or Crystal Meth has multiple factors associated with the initiation of its use; social and financial aspects, mental and physical health effects, facilitators, and barriers to the cessation of use. There is a need for collaboration between the government, anti-narcotics department, public health professionals, and health care providers to design and effectively utilize new strategies to combat drug dealing and drug-using social networks.

**Key Words:** patterns, explore, Ice or crystal meth, qualitative.

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## INTRODUCTION

Crystal Meth or Ice is the purest and most potent form of the drug tends to be used most commonly by young, educated, and employed<sup>1</sup>. Methamphetamine is one of the amphetamine-type substances (ATS) ad-

ministered through inhalation, injection, and ingestion<sup>1</sup>. It is chemically synthesized from ephedrine or pseudoephedrine<sup>2</sup>. Crystal meth is considered being highly addictive and its use causes severe physical and mental adverse health effects<sup>3</sup>. Literature has revealed that crystal meth use is associated with increased heart rate (causing cardiac arrhythmias), blood pressure, and increased body temperature in short term and can result in pulmonary hypertension, stroke, and deleterious effects on cognitive processes in long term<sup>2,4</sup>. Ice or crystal is the second most widely used illicit drug in the world, consumed by 24 million users worldwide<sup>3,4</sup>. Globally, it contributes to 71% of all ATS seizures<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, there is strong evidence linking the use of crystal meth with polyvalent drugs consumption, violence, and unsafe sex practices<sup>5,6</sup>.

A recent study 'Global Burden of Disease' reveals that drug dependence poses serious threats to human health in terms of premature deaths and disabilities<sup>7</sup>. In the year 2012, around 183,000 drug-related deaths were reported, and between 162 million and 324 million people of age 15-64 used illicit drugs mainly cannabis, opioid, cocaine, and amphetamine-type stimulant (ATS)<sup>7</sup>.

ATS refers to the group of synthetic drugs that include amphetamine, methamphetamine, methcathinone, fenetylline, ephedrine, and 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) also called Ecstasy<sup>7</sup>. Methamphetamine is a distinct psychostimulant with different descriptors in different countries such as meth, ice, crystal, crank, or tik<sup>3,7,8</sup>.

As drug traffickers have found new ways to skirt around the law, increasing meth-trafficking around the globe<sup>1,7</sup>. According to the latest estimates by UNODC, the worldwide organic (plant-based) drugs markets are stable or declining, while the synthetic drugs abuse is increasing. The affordability, convenience of use, and association with the modern lifestyle are important factors that contribute to the shift in market trends towards the use of ATS<sup>7,8</sup>.

According to the report on drug use in Pakistan published by UNODC in 2013, approximately 6% of the population or 6.7 million people had used any illicit substances in a year; 4.25 million were considered being drug-dependent<sup>8</sup>. Previously undetected in Pakistan, trace levels of meth were being reported with around 19000 people estimated to have used

this stimulant in a year<sup>8</sup>. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has overall the highest prevalence of drug use, crystal meth being an emergent form of substance abuse<sup>7,8</sup>.

The study was planned to explore the factors associated with initiation, socio-demographic features, financial aspects, mental health and well-being, cessation, and uptake of rehabilitation services in Peshawar. This study was conducted to enhance the understanding of the perceived accessibility and the role of law enforcement agencies in encountering drug trafficking in Peshawar. The study aimed to draw the attention of national and international stakeholders to the hovering meth storm in Peshawar. The overall aim of the study was: To explore the patterns of use of Ice (or crystal meth) in district Peshawar.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

Formal technical and ethical approval was taken from the ethical review board of Khyber Medical University. A qualitative phenomenology study approach was chosen to explore the patterns of use of Ice or (Crystal Meth) in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Study participants were active Ice users and were recruited through purposive sampling. In-depth interviews (IDI) from a total of n=30 active methamphetamine users, including both males and females, were conducted. The number of participants was decided on the availability of users for an IDI and the attainability of saturation of information. This qualitative study was conducted from March to August 2019 in district Peshawar. The peer referral method was used to approach and select the desired participants.

All willing to participate were active nontherapeutic methamphetamine users, having age equal to or above 18 years living in Peshawar and/or any individual who has used Ice during the last six months, were included in the study. An interview guide was used to conduct the in-depth interviews. An open-ended questionnaire was developed from literature and these questions were validated by peer review of Public Health experts and pilot tested. Informed consent was taken from the participants. All the responses were kept confidential and anonymous. The same moderator was used for each individual. Discussion points were transcribed from a voice recorder. After each session, the moderator and assistant moderator reviewed all the transcripts and coded the data under various headings. An analysis

of a text was done based on word repetitions, key-indigenous terms, and key-words-in contexts using an open coding technique. These codes and themes were then shared with experts for an opinion. Differences were sorted out and agreed upon by consensus. Data collection and data analysis were done simultaneously. To maintain the integrity of qualitative data, a process of data triangulation was followed. Validation strategies that include credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were followed to judge and evaluate the quality of research<sup>9</sup>.

## RESULTS

The thematic presentation of the patterns of the use of Ice is illustrated in figure 1. Four distinct recurrent themes emerged from the responses of the different stakeholders.

These are;

1. Beginning of “The End”- From recreation to habituation
2. Dynamics of Ice/Crystal Meth- Lost into the Fog
3. Ice or Crystal Meth- A Contagious Social Virus
4. Breaking Through “The Wall”

Each of the four themes was further categorized into subsequent sub-themes and the consensus was reached on seven broad categories i.e., initiation of use, frequency, socio-demographic features, financial aspect and accessibility, effects on physical, mental, and sexual health, punishment by law, cessation, and rehabilitation.

### 1. Beginning of “The End”- From Recreation to Habituation

This theme metaphorically states that the use of Ice or crystal meth among its users usually begins as a recreational activity and subsequently becomes their habit. With each passing day, meth users progressively accumulate far reaching damage to their life. Addiction to Ice is so strong that it turns the life of its user into a state of continuous suffering and results in worst transformations.

This theme indicates the factors associated with the initiation of use of Ice. Almost all the participants of the study identified the role of peers; polydrug use and ease of accessibility were important factors in

the initiation of use of Ice or crystal meth. They also identified that recreational drug use and trying new drugs out of curiosity were also important factors in the initiation of Ice use. The majority of the respondents were teenagers and in their early twenties by the time they started using methamphetamine. Most of them were educated. Some of them were employed, while others were unemployed. Some of the representative statements for the theme ‘Beginning of “The End”- From recreation to habituation’ are:

A 27-year-old female user: *“I was 21 years old by the time I tried Ice for the first time. I was introduced by a close friend of mine at a bachelor’s party at a friend’s place. The place was covered in smoke. My friend told me he has already tried it once. I inhaled a few puffs of smoke and it made my night. I was high, energetic, and joyful for the time, but later on, I was feeling upset and thinking I shouldn’t have tried it in the first place.”*

A 24-year-old male user: *“I do multiple drugs. I am a regular alcohol and cannabis user, but I have also done LSD, cocaine, and heroin. I tried Ice out of curiosity. One day while I was drinking alcohol with my friend, he took out a packet of white crystals from his pocket and put some crystals in a glass of alcohol. It got diluted, and he drank it. I told him I would not drink it in alcohol. He said ‘ok, let’s smoke it then’ and we smoked it.”*

A 21-year-old male user: *“Some of my best friends from college used to smoke Ice. I always preferred cannabis but friends were fond of Ice. One day while I was at a friend’s place, they asked me to smoke it as all of them were smoking. I did not want to smoke that stuff. I was contented with cannabis, but I also wanted to continue being part of that gathering. So, I told them I will smoke it only once and they won’t ask me again. They all agreed to it. That was the first time I tried Ice. I was 18 years old and now I am 21 and I am frequently using it. It has deeply affected my life through these years, I know and I realize this.”*

### Dynamics of Ice or Crystal Meth- Lost into the Fog

This theme metaphorically describes the positive and negative health dynamics of methamphetamine users. Almost all respondents believed that ice/crystal meth is a strong drug with increased cravings

and a desire for frequent use. It has less positive and more negative health effects. The positive effects were described as the short-term increase in energy, increase in work performance, and activeness. The negative effects were described as increased drug craving and tolerance, increased heartbeat and sweating, increased thirst, decreased appetite and loss of sleep, adverse physical and mental health issues. Some of the representative statements for the theme 'Dynamics of Ice/crystal meth- Lost into the fog' are:

A 30-year-old male user: *"Crystal meth gives you a false feeling of joy. You think you can conquer the world. You feel confident, talkative, and perfect, but actually, it's the influence of Ice. I never felt satisfied with Ice's use. Whenever I use it, I want to do more. Sometimes I feel I am losing my mind. I don't understand what's happening to me."*

A 27-year-old male user: *"Ice knows no home, friends, elders or youngsters. It's only Ice. It gives you the feeling of your world and you are lost in it. It affects your relations, health, and life."*

A 25-year-old female user: *"I felt upset after the use. Felt bad about me and the people. Sometimes I become aggressive and engage into fights with my family. I face difficulty in controlling my thoughts, although. I use sleeping pills to get some sleep and to calm my mind."*

### 3. Ice or Crystal Meth- A Contagious Social Virus

The rising meth market through street business is a threat to society. The majority of the respondents believed that crystal meth has gained popularity among the educated and elite class of society. It's trendy among the youth and getting viral day by day, spreading like an epidemic in society. Some of the representative statements for the theme 'Ice or crystal meth- A contagious social virus' are:

A 29-year-old male user: *"Ice is getting viral day by day. Many government officers and the public representatives use it. This drug is getting trendy among the youth. It is used at parties and social gatherings. Almost all the people in my social circle (Ice users) belong to a well-reputed and educated family."*

A 22-year-old male user: *"Ice is a partner drug. It needs company. It affects your life socially and financially. I used to buy a gram of Ice for two*

*thousand rupees. Now I can get it for eight hundred only, but the quality has been compromised. I usually buy it with my own pocket money. But many times, I have also stolen money from my family to buy Ice. I felt depress and upset sometimes. I think many other users will feel the same."*

### 4. Breaking Through "The Wall"

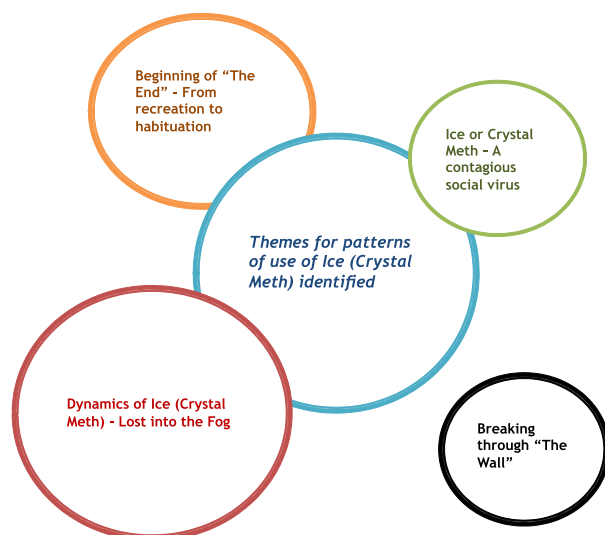
This theme metaphorically describes the factors which act as barriers (The Wall) to the cessation of use of Ice and also describes the factors which act as facilitators of abstinence. Almost all the respondents identified that the availability of Ice is the biggest challenge to the cessation of its use. Drug-using environments and no specific punishments in law pushed the young people towards methamphetamine use. They believed that a person's willpower is the most important facilitating factor for the cessation of use of Ice. Public awareness, sharing methamphetamine users' bad experiences, making strict policies to monitor trade across the borders, and punishing the drug dealers were the factors identified as facilitators of cessation of methamphetamine. Some of the representative statements for the theme -Breaking through "The Wall"- are as follows:

A 26-year-old male user: *Stopping Ice is a miracle. Ice says, 'if you try me once I might let u go, but if you try me twice, I will own your soul'. It cannot be stopped forcefully. However, a person's willpower can play a role. As far as the local drug dealers are dealing with teenagers and youth, it's impossible to stop the use of Ice. Stopping the trade, catching the dealers, and monitoring the borders for smuggling is the only way to decrease the spread.*

A 29-year-old male user: *Public awareness through television advertisements of sharing users' bad experiences can create a disliking among the new generation for the drugs. Parents should keep an eye on their children. Local police should be made aware of the new drug in town as most of them are still unaware and do not recognize it.*

## DISCUSSION

This study is the first to explore the factors associated with the initiation of use of methamphetamine from the user's perspective in the North West of Pakistan. The study identified methamphetamine as a new emerging trend in drug abuse. Almost all the meth users identified the role of peers in the initiation of Ice



**Figure 1: Thematic presentation of patterns of use of Ice (Crystal Meth)**

use. This perception was also highlighted in a study conducted by Andrea L. Hobkirk et al. in Cape Town, South Africa. Contrary to the Cape Town study, there was no such factor identified in the current study, such as gang membership for income generation<sup>3</sup>. Another study with similar findings was conducted in Thailand by Susan G. Sherman et al. This study also identified peers' pressure as a key factor in the initiation of Ice<sup>10</sup>. According to the current study, many participants were already involved in polydrug use before they started crystal meth. The most commonly used drugs were cannabis and alcohol. The majority of the respondents stated that they prefer inhalation as a route of administration of Ice. Some of them were also trying other routes of administration such as ingestion. A qualitative study conducted by Janie Sheridan et al in New Zealand revealed that most of the participants of the study were experienced users of other drugs but they lack knowledge about using crystal meth. They were introduced by peers in their social circle. Their primary route of administration on the first use of the substance was inhalation<sup>11</sup>.

Our study also explored different health dynamics of crystal meth. According to the users' perspective, Ice produces a strong euphoric rush throughout the body. They described their first experience as joyful, energetic, and full of confidence. The study also explored various adverse health effects, including an increase intolerance with the use, mental compulsion, aggressiveness, relationship, and trust issues with family. Similar findings were reported in a study conducted by Jane Carlisle Maxwell in

Texas. However, in contrast to our study, sexually transmitted diseases were also reported in the study conducted by Jane Carlisle Maxwell<sup>2</sup>. Butler et al. in New Zealand conducted another study with similar findings. The study reported that participants had a range of physical and mental health consequences of methamphetamine use<sup>12</sup>. Another study was conducted in Bangkok by Chulathida Chomchai et al. showing the use of methamphetamine at low doses results in neurologic and physical effects including enhanced mood, increased work performance, and decreased fatigability. At high doses, meth causes increased sympathetic activities, resulting in an increased heart rate, sweating, hyperthermia, and agitation<sup>13</sup>.

The majority of the respondents in our study believed that Ice is gaining popularity and is frequently used as a partner or party drug. A study conducted by Brian C. Kelly et al in New York also identified the rise of meth use within New York club subcultures. Many simply described it as, "Crystal is dirtier"<sup>14</sup>.

The current study explored that Ice affects financial wellbeing and social relationships. When Ice users lose their purchasing power due to financial constraints, they steal money for buying it. They also identified that Ice plays a controversial role in preserving and losing relationships. On one hand, it is used by many young adults to preserve their social circle with a desire to fit in and on the other hand, its use causes aggressive behavior and trust issues in relationships. A study done in New York, by Kathleen A. Park et al. also identified similar reasons in a social context associated with crystal meth use<sup>15</sup>. The present study identified methamphetamine as a 'social virus that spreads day by day. This is fueled by the perceived normality of drug use by the educated and elite classes. A study conducted by Danya Fast et al. examined youth's understanding and experience of meth use in the context of an urban drug scene. The study revealed youth were simultaneously aware of the many health-related harms and social costs associated with heavy meth use yet involved drug-related risky behaviors<sup>16</sup>.

Our study explored the users' perspectives regarding the barriers and facilitators of drug abstinence. The facilitators to abstinence were emotional awareness, thinking about themselves and family, and physical and mental health effects of

methamphetamine. Most of the users believed that changing policies at the institutional/organizational level and the development of compensation mechanisms can facilitate coming out of the “Ice-age”. Similar findings were highlighted in a qualitative study conducted by Diane M. Herbeck, M.A. et al. Common barriers to abstinence were peer pressure, polydrug use, and addiction. However, in contrast to our study, Diane also identified external pressure such as mandatory drug tests and the threat of jail as facilitators of drug abstinence, while no such factor was identified in the current study<sup>17</sup>. According to the present study, the availability of methamphetamine through border trade and street business by local dealers was identified as the biggest challenge in cessation to the spread and use of Ice. A study conducted in Melbourne, Australia by Cameron Duff and David Moore identified that the ongoing tensions manifest in two ways: in the management of ‘street business’ in the delivery of services and in negotiating the meaning of health and the terms of its restoration or promotion<sup>18</sup>. Another study with similar findings was done by Judith Cunniff in the United States regarding meth crises and their management. The study showed that the meth market was rising at an alarming rate. The participants were in business, government, and schools. They identified that supply and demand are the ultimate drivers for the drug market. As long as there is profit in the production and sale of the methamphetamine business, the best authorities can do is put pressure on the industry and reduce its presence in specific areas. Meth may never be eliminated, but only be monitored and managed, and it is up to every citizen to do their part in controlling this problem<sup>19</sup>.

The current study identified individuals’ own ‘willpower’ as an important facilitator to the cessation of use of Ice. A study was conducted by Jeanette Kennett et al. all of which indicated that willpower remained important and recovery was dependent on developing strategies to preserve willpower by controlling environments<sup>20</sup>. A study was conducted by Laura Hoffmann et al in Central Germany found that behavior therapies were the most effective method for methamphetamine-addicted people. In our study, the need for establishing counseling centers was identified for the people involved in drug abuse, especially for the young generation. It was explored from users’ perspective that counseling is the key to motivating users to quit drug abuse.

The limitation of the present study is that this study was conducted in only one city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the results cannot be generalized to the rest of the provinces of Pakistan due to contextual variations. Another limiting factor is that only users’ perspective was considered in the present study. Opinions of health care professionals could have enhanced the applicability of the cessation and rehabilitation challenges.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified multiple factors associated with the initiation of use of Ice or crystal meth in Peshawar. The study has also identified the social and financial aspects; mental and physical health effects of Ice use. The study explored the facilitators and barriers to the cessation of use of Ice and the need for rehabilitation. This study showed that Ice or crystal meth is the hovering storm in town that needs effective intervention to rescue our young generation.

There is a need for wider application of both qualitative and quantitative research regarding the emerging trends in illicit drug use and to suggest effective interventions. It can also be investigated whether changes within the government strategies and policies can make any difference in combating the drug dealing social networks.

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