

Partnership Pieces July 13, 2006



### **Meth Use, Identity Theft Seen Linked**

Authorities in Western states say that many methamphetamine users now apply the energy and focus caused by the drug to the detail-oriented crime of identity theft, sometimes putting in long hours akin to a full-time job. Police in cities like Denver are starting to put together meth use and a rise in other crimes, like theft from mailboxes and garbage cans, typical of the information-gathering needed for identity-theft crimes. Meth users often steal check or credit-card numbers to generate funds to buy drugs or chemicals to make more meth. Although it is possible that identity thieves who use meth are merely easier to nab and prosecute, police and treatment professionals interviewed believe the link is deeper. Identity theft and methamphetamine use and addiction complement each other for a number of reasons, from the nature of the drug's high to the fact that many meth labs are in rural areas where addicts can steal mail from unlocked boxes. Acetone, a chemical used in meth labs, also can be used to "wash" checks so they can be written again. "Crack users and heroin users are so disorganized and get in these frantic binges, they're not going to sit still and do anything in an organized way for very long," said UCLA addiction researcher Richard Rawson. "Meth users, on the other hand, that's all they have, is time. The drug stimulates the part of the brain that perseverates on things. So you get people perseverating on things, and if you sit down at a computer terminal you can go for hours and hours." "Going and stealing money from people is too risky," said "D," a former meth addict and identity thief from Montana. "With this, I was sitting in my car at a bank, I could drive away if I wanted to. That's the only way I would have ever considered because I felt it was more safe."

### **Neurobiology Added to Social, Moral Debate on Teen Drinking**

Experts once believed that it took a long period of heavy drinking to injure the brain, but mounting research suggests that alcohol may readily damage the developing brains of teenagers. Preliminary animal research has shown that doses of alcohol similar to binge drinking episodes may cause cellular damage to the forebrain and hippocampus of adolescents, perhaps explaining why -- as a different study of human subjects recently found -- people who begin drinking at a young age are at much higher risk of becoming alcoholics. Studies also have shown that young drinkers perform poorly on a variety of cognitive tests. Researchers have found that alcohol suppresses the action of chemical receptors in the hippocampus of young rats, impairing the development of new memories. Drinking affected the learning ability of young rats far more than it impaired the cognitive function of older rats. While it is uncertain how directly applicable the rat studies are to people, the findings are consistent with recent research exploring the neurobiological effects of alcohol in adolescent humans. Young drinkers may experience more alcohol-related "blackouts" than previously believed, which may be explained by the effect of drinking on the developing hippocampus. Drinking also appears to make the brain less responsive to the neurotransmitter GABA among young people; GABA helps induce calmness and sleepiness, which may be why young drinkers can often remain conscious and keep drinking even after older drinkers pass out. Impulse control also is impaired by drinking, research shows -- a particular hazard for already impetuous youth. "Alcohol creates disruption in parts of the brain essential for self-control, motivation and goal setting," said University of North Carolina researcher Fulton Crews. "Early drinking is affecting a sensitive brain in a way that promotes the progression to addiction."

### **Smoking Under Age 21 Could Be Outlawed in NYC**

The mayor's office in New York City is giving serious consideration to a proposal to raise the city's legal smoking age from 18 to 21. Joel Rivera, chair of the City Council's health committee, recently introduced a bill to raise the smoking age, and city Health Commissioner Thomas Frieden said that the idea is "certainly something that should be looked at." "We need to think about ways that we can further reduce smoking," he said. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has taken aggressive steps to limit smoking in the city, including banning smoking in public places and imposing hefty taxes on cigarettes. The city also has cracked down on stores that sell cigarettes to minors. New York state lawmakers this year proposed raising the state's legal smoking age to 19, but the measure died.