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Oil Is Not All That's Booming In North Dakota — So Is Drug Trade

by [NPR Staff](#)

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Local and federal authorities worry over a rise in North Dakota's drug trade. Sharon Cohen of the Associated Press explains the proposed solutions to the issue, which some tie to the recent oil boom.

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AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

Shale oil production has been booming for years in the prairies of North Dakota and Montana. Once small, sleepy towns are now swollen with out-of-state people hunting for work thanks to the success of the Bakken oil patch. And with all the new people and all that new money, crime has been booming as well. Drug and gang activity has exploded in recent years. And even with plenty of federal law enforcement help, local police are stretched to the limit.

Sharon Cohen is a national writer for the Associated Press. She's been covering this story and she joins us now from Chicago. Welcome.

SHARON COHEN: Thank you.

CORNISH: So, Sharon, you wrote just recently about some pretty major drug busts in this area. Give us a sense, maybe using numbers, how much has crime increased during the boom?

COHEN: The federal prosecutors in the western part of the state say that their cases have tripled in the last few years. And most of that is due to drug cases involving multiple people.

CORNISH: And you cite in North Dakota State University study called "Policing the Patch," from last year, that looked at service calls in places like Williston, where they saw numbers triple, right, almost 16,000 calls in 2011?

COHEN: Correct. In Williston, I think the number of police calls has increased by about four times. In some of the smaller towns - there's a town called Watford City, the number of police calls has increased by a hundred times. So these very small departments that would get maybe dozens of calls a year are now getting hundreds or even thousands.

CORNISH: Now, meth had been a problem for rural communities like the ones you found in North Dakota before the boom. Can you describe how the drug trade is different now?

COHEN: Sure. The drug trade years ago was largely meth, from the area, produced in the area by small labs - mom-and-pop labs. And North Dakota was successful in cracking down on those labs. But now you see a different kind of meth. Most of it is coming from Mexico, often through the West Coast - maybe California, Washington State - and it's being transported into North Dakota.

That meth is more potent, more pure. So it's a different kind of meth and the quantities often tend to be larger than they were when it was homegrown meth.

CORNISH: And so, are police also dealing with a different kind of dealer?

COHEN: Yes, they are and they're still trying to figure it out. There are drug dealers that are small. There are cartels that are involved. So the head of the FBI in the area said they're still trying to get a handle on who is running the show, basically. And it's not just one organization. It's several. So I think that makes it harder.

CORNISH: Now, working in the oil fields is dangerous work. What have you been hearing from workers about on-the-job drug use?

COHEN: It's very hard to know who's involved, who's using up there. We did talk to a young man who was working in the oil business. And he came up to North Dakota to get away from drugs. He was involved in drugs in the Chicago area. And he said there are people who are using, they feel it can increase their endurance, they can work longer hours.

The major companies have very strict drug policies, but somehow it's getting used and there's a market for it. There's a lot of money up there. And where there is a lot of money and a lot of people with nothing to do, it's a prime market for drug traffickers.

CORNISH: You spoke to one veteran sheriff who said that he once employed a, quote, "North Dakotan nice philosophy" when it came to law enforcement. Can you talk about how deep the learning curve has been for these departments? What's changed them?

COHEN: I think for the law enforcement, I think particularly for the smaller departments, it's quite a bit of a learning curve because they've not had to deal with this before. And there's a lot of transient people coming in and out of the communities, so it's very hard to watch and follow what's going on. For the sheriff's office, a lot of these departments have had local drug task forces that have been working on these problems for years. But I think the number of cases has just expanded so quickly and so greatly that it's just hard to keep ahead of it.

So the federal authorities are beefing up some of their activities in the area. The ATF, FBI, the DEA, all of them are increasing efforts to try to bolster some of the local law enforcement efforts.

CORNISH: Sharon Cohen, she's a national writer for the Associated Press. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

COHEN: Thank you.

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