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## Assessing Methamphetamine Use among Refugee Youth in Omaha

Lisa L. Sample

*University of Nebraska at Omaha, lsample@unomaha.edu*

Karen Rolf

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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## **Assessing Methamphetamine Use among Refugee Youth in Omaha**



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The College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) was created in 1973 to ensure that the university was responsive to the critical social needs of our community and state. The College was given the mission not only to provide educational programs of the highest caliber to prepare students for leadership in public service, but also to reach out to the community to help solve public problems.

The College has become a national leader among similar colleges, with nine programs ranked in the top 25 in the nation. Our faculty ranks are among the finest in their disciplines. Faculty, staff, and students are integral to the community and state because of our applied research, service learning, and community partnerships. We take our duty seriously to help address social needs and craft solutions to local, state, and national problems. For more information, visit our website: [cpacs.unomaha.edu](http://cpacs.unomaha.edu)

## CPACS Urban Research Awards

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# Assessing Methamphetamine Use among Refugee Youth in Omaha

**Lisa Sample**

Professor, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

**Karen Rolf**

Associate Professor, Grace Abbott School of Social Work  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

**Spring 2017**

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College of Public Affairs and Community Service Dean's Office.



## ABSTRACT

Representatives from social service agencies in Omaha have reported an alarming increase in the use of methamphetamine (meth) among Karen adolescents in Omaha. To determine the state of meth use among Karen youth in Omaha, 2 focus groups of youth, ranging in age from 12-17, were organized. Findings suggest, like most youth, the Karen children were reluctant to disclose their own use of drugs, but they did see the use of meth and other drugs in their schools as a problem. No juveniles in these groups spoke of the use of meth in refugee camps, but rather they were introduced to this drug in Omaha schools. More importantly, most children talked about the use of "yaba" or marijuana as the most common drug of choice among other students they know. It appears drug use among the Karen youth is acquired during the "Americanization" of these children in Omaha schools. The goal of the study is to assess if Karen youth are overrepresented among meth users in Omaha as described by the practices of their home country or if they are simply assimilating to American culture.



# Assessing Methamphetamine Use among Refugee Youth in Omaha

Lisa L. Sample, Ph.D.

Karen Rolf, Ph.D.

Brooke Cooley, MS

This study was funded by a CPACS Urban  
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## Methamphetamine

- According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) (2012) methamphetamine is a highly addictive substance that produces an intense sense of pleasure and energy.
- Short-term effects on the individual include: aggression, memory impairment, dental issues, weight loss and malnutrition, heart damage, psychotic behavior, and greater susceptibility to chronic infections such as hepatitis and HIV. Chronic long-term effects lead to structural changes in the areas of the brain that are responsible for emotional functioning and cognitive reasoning (Rawson et al., 2007).



## Methamphetamine Use

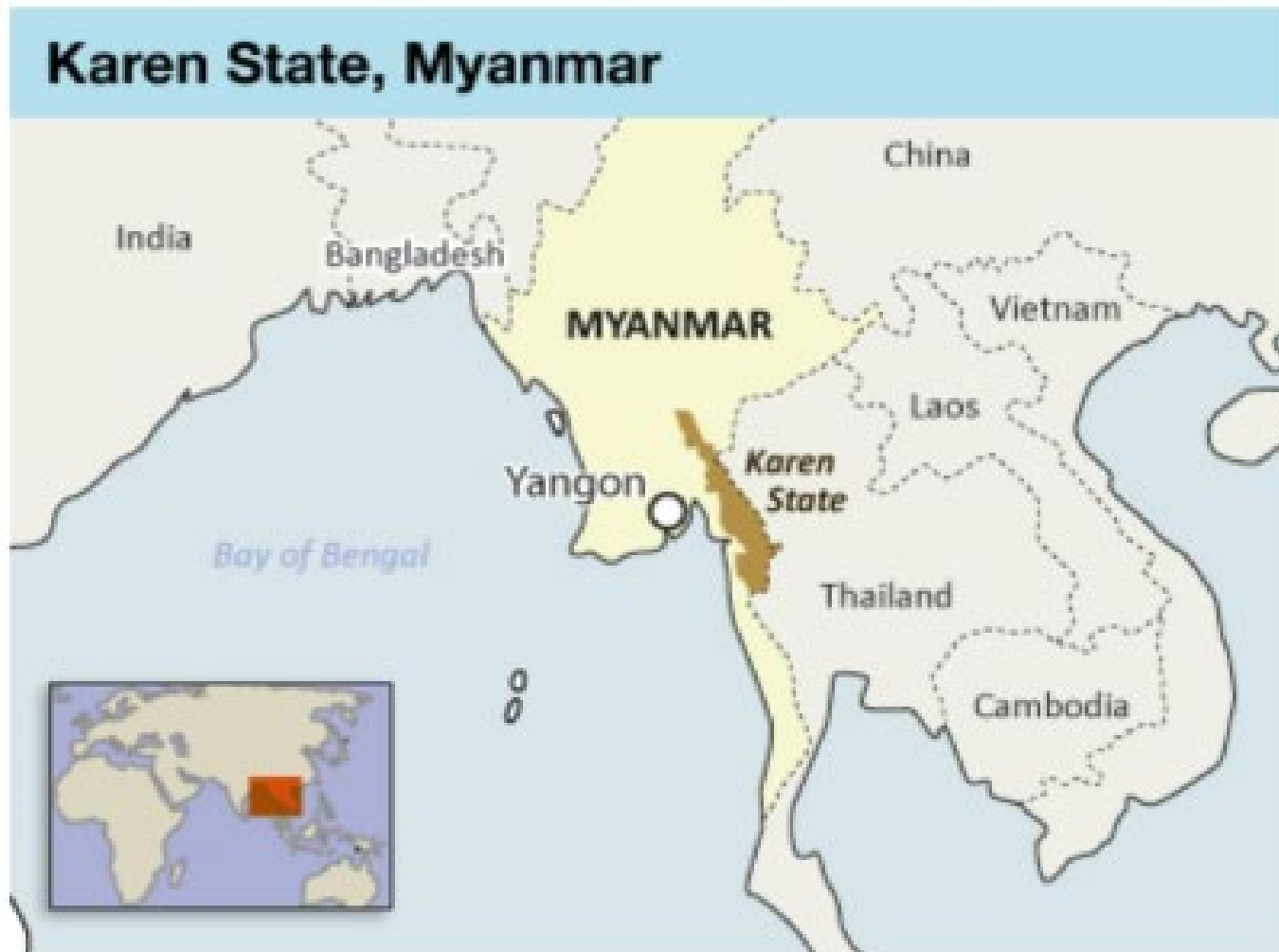
- Overall, the number of youth using meth in the U.S. has declined significantly since 1999 (Johnston et al., 2009).
- Specific to Nebraska: the rate of meth use among middle school and high school students has remained relatively constant over time, with 1.1% of all students surveyed in 2012 and 2014 reporting that they have tried methamphetamines (Radatz, Vandenberg, and Sample, 2015).







# The Karen



## The Karen

- Burmese refugees are a heterogeneous group of Karen, Karenni, Chin, and Kachin ethnic groups and Burmese Muslims persecuted for their religious beliefs.
- Omaha is home to an estimated 7,000 refugees from Burma, with at least 75% of those being Karen refugees.





## Methamphetamine Use in Burma & Neighboring Regions

- It is estimated that over half of the world's 15-16 million methamphetamine users reside in Southeast and East Asia (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007).
- The Thai-Burmese border is a unique location for the trafficking of meth. Thailand has become one of the largest consumers of methamphetamine pills, also known as *ya ba* ("crazy drug"), in the world, with youth consisting of the majority of users.




## Meth Use among Karen Youth in Omaha

- The Prevention of the Expansion of Meth Use in Refugee Youth (PEMRY) group was organized in May, 2014 to address the issue of meth use among refugee youth after adolescents in the Juvenile Justice system began to test positive for meth in January, 2014.
- However, little is known about the extent of use among Karen youth in Omaha or the United States.



## The Current Study

### Research Questions:

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- How knowledgeable are Karen youth about meth?
  - What are youth estimates of the prevalence of meth use in the Karen Community?
    - a) In Omaha
    - b) In refugee camps
  - For Karen youth who know what meth is, what are their attributions about why people use meth?
  - From where do you think Karen youth get their methamphetamines?



## Sample & Data Collection

- A snowball sample was employed with families who participate in the *Ready in Five Program*.
- Focus groups were utilized in order to interview Karen Youth. (N=6) (N=5)





## Findings: How Knowledgeable are Karen youth about Meth?

- The Karen youth know meth is a drug and it is addictive. They said they heard stories of people when they do it they have short tempers, often get into fights, have hallucinations, and have a sense of invincibility.



## Findings: What are youth estimates of the prevalence of meth use in the Karen Community?

- Among the two focus groups there was a consensus that most Karen youth begin trying drugs in middle school but it is mostly high school students who use. Mixed comments about the prevalence of meth use among Karen youth.
- “I don’t think so. I think they do less (compared to U.S. youth). Yeah, cuz they don’t really know much about drugs they just do I think mostly weed.”







Findings: For Karen youth who know what meth is what are their attributions about why people use meth?

- Participants stated they thought others used drugs to fit in.
- “They might think it’s cool to use drugs.”
- “If they see other people do it they will start doing it just to be cool and like stuff like that.”
- One participant said maybe they felt pressure from others to do it.



## Findings: From where do you think Karen youth get their methamphetamines?

- Overwhelming consensus was they learned about meth and other drugs from school. Almost all the participants went to different high schools and middle schools but all agreed that they hear about drugs in school.
- “I never heard of those (different types of drugs) until I came to the U.S. Yeah and we learn from school and stuff.”
- (In schools) “They talk about drugs, like all drugs, but a lot about weed.”





Findings: From where do you think Karen youth get their methamphetamines?

- Previously we believed *ya ba* was referred to as meth by the Karen, but they call marijuana *ya ba* which is still a common name in the United States for the Karen community.
- In addition, in the first focus group, participants stated they called meth “Gla” (no English translation).



## Conclusion

- No juveniles spoke of the use of meth in refugee camps.
- They were introduced to drugs in the Omaha school system.
- Karen youth did see meth use and other drugs in their school as a problem.
- Most youth talked about the use of *ya ba (marijuana)* as the most common drug of choice among students they know.





## Future Research

- We wish to expand our previous study to include focus groups of Karen adults, so we can ask them about meth and other drug use in the camps and after arrival in the U.S.
- We would like to interview other individuals including school social workers, other stakeholders, and personnel since they may not view this as an issue, or see this differently.

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Thank you!  
Brooke Cooley  
[bcooley@unomaha.edu](mailto:bcooley@unomaha.edu)

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