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Illnesses Afflict Homes With a Criminal Past



Josh Anderson for The New York Times

Rhonda Holt and her son Ethan comforted 2-year-old Anna, who needed breathing treatment after the relapse of an illness that began in their meth-contaminated home. [More Photos](#)

By [SHAILA DEWAN](#) and [ROBBIE BROWN](#)

Published: July 13, 2009

WINCHESTER, Tenn. — The spacious home where the newly wed Rhonda and Jason Holt began their family in 2005 was plagued by mysterious illnesses. The Holts' three babies were ghostlike and listless, with breathing problems that called for respirators, repeated trips to the emergency room and, for the middle child, Anna, the heaviest dose of [steroids](#) a toddler can take.

Ms. Holt, a nurse, developed migraines. She and her husband, a factory worker, had kidney ailments.

It was not until February, more than five years after they moved in, that the couple discovered the root of their troubles: their house, across the road from a cornfield in this town some 70 miles south of Nashville, was contaminated with high levels of methamphetamine left by the previous occupant, who had been dragged from the attic by the police.

The Holts' next realization was almost as devastating: it was up to them to spend the \$30,000 or more that cleanup would require.

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Josh Anderson for The New York Times

Cleanup of the Holts' home, in Winchester, Tenn., will cost them at least \$30,000. [More Photos](#) »

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With meth lab seizures on the rise nationally for the first time since 2003, similar cases are playing out in several states, drawing attention to the problem of meth contamination, which can permeate drywall, carpets, insulation and air ducts, causing respiratory ailments and other health problems.

Federal data on meth lab seizures suggest that there are tens of thousands of contaminated residences in the United States. The victims include low-income elderly people whose homes are surreptitiously used by relatives or in-laws to make meth, and landlords whose tenants leave them with a toxic mess.

Some states have tried to fix the problem by requiring cleanup and, at the time of sale, disclosure of the house's history. But the high cost of cleaning — \$5,000 to \$100,000, depending on the size of the home, the stringency of the requirements and the degree of contamination — has left hundreds of properties vacant and quarantined, particularly in Western and Southern states afflicted with meth use.

"The meth lab home problem is only going to grow," said Dawn Turner, who started a Web site, www.methlabhomes.com, after her son lost thousands of dollars when he bought a foreclosed home in Sweetwater, Tenn., that turned out to be contaminated. Because less is known about the history of foreclosed houses, Ms. Turner said, "as foreclosures rise, so will the number of new meth lab home owners."

Meth contamination can bring financial ruin to families like that of Francisca Rodriguez. The family dog began having seizures nine days after the Rodriguezes moved into their home in Grapevine, Tex., near Dallas, and their 6-year-old son developed a breathing problem similar to [asthma](#), said Ms. Rodriguez, 35, a stay-at-home mother of three.

After learning from neighbors that the three-bedroom ranch-style home had been a known "drug house," the family had it tested. The air ducts had meth levels more than 100 times higher than the most commonly cited limit beyond which cleanup is typically required.

The former owner had marked "no" on a disclosure form asking whether the house had ever been a meth lab, Ms. Rodriguez said. But because he is now in prison for meth possession, among other things, the Rodriguezes decided there was nothing to gain by suing him. They moved out, throwing away most of their possessions because they could not be cleaned, and are letting the house go into foreclosure.

"It makes you crazy," Ms. Rodriguez said. "Our credit is ruined, we won't be able to buy another house, somebody exposed my kids to meth, and my dog died."

Federal statistics show that the number of clandestine meth labs discovered in the United States rose by 14 percent last year, to 6,783, and has continued to increase, in part because of a crackdown on meth manufacturers in Mexico and in part because of the spread of a new, easier meth-making method known as "shake and bake."

There are no national standards governing meth contamination. Congress ordered the [Environmental Protection Agency](#) to publish cleanup guidelines by the end of 2008, but the agency is still reviewing a draft version. Without standards, professional cleaners say, it is easy to bungle a job that often requires gutting and repeated washing.

About 20 states have passed laws requiring meth contamination cleanup, and they use widely varied standards. Virtually all the laws hold the property owner financially responsible; Colorado appears to be the only state that allots federal grant money to help innocent property owners faced with unexpected cleanup jobs.



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In other states, like Georgia, landlords and other real estate owners have fought a proposed cleanup law.

After the Holts bought their house here, Tennessee passed such a law. But since 2005, only 81 of 303 homes placed under a resulting quarantine have been cleaned, according to the state, which has one of the few registries tracking meth lab addresses. The law applies only if the police find a working meth lab at the house, and Jerry Hood, a lawyer and cleanup contractor hired by the Holts for the decontamination work, said many houses in the county had escaped the legislation.

The health effects of meth contamination are frequently difficult to prove, and research is scant. But John W. Martyny, a meth expert at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, said living in a former meth lab made children more likely to develop learning disabilities and caused long-term respiratory and skin problems.

Even brief exposure can have severe effects, Dr. Martyny said. A 2007 study by the Denver center found that more than 70 percent of law enforcement officials who had inspected meth labs subsequently reported health problems.

To Ms. Holt's horror, inspectors found high concentrations of meth on her kitchen countertops, where she sterilized bottles, prepared baby food and doled out snacks.

"We had no idea that we were starting a family in a meth house," she said. "We bought a house that eventually was going to sentence our family to death."

When the family left the house, moving in with Mr. Holt's parents, their health problems largely subsided. The children no longer needed medication to breathe. The migraines and the kidney ailments vanished.

But the heartaches continued. Ms. Holt has been working two jobs to earn money to pay for her house's remediation, which has proceeded in fits and starts with donations from church fund-raisers and local businesses. And Anna, 2, had a relapse and had to return briefly to the hospital.

"We don't know what it's going to be in the future," Ms. Holt said, standing in the barren, unfinished structure that was once her dream home and reflecting on her children. "This meth contamination is all their immune systems have ever known."

A version of this article appeared in print on July 14, 2009, on page A1 of the New York edition.

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