

Police find portable meth lab in car trunk



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A new trend in the making of the illegal drug methamphetamine rolled into Rapid City for the first time that police know of this week when a routine traffic stop uncovered a mobile meth lab in the trunk of a passenger car.

The methods of manufacturing meth have changed over the years, and labs that once consumed entire homes and then downsized into motel rooms can now be contained within the trunk of a car, said Sgt. Tony Harrison of the

Rapid City Police Department.

The labs have become smaller, often using heavy plastic bottles, often used for sports drinks, as containers to make the drug.

"They are no longer the more complicated, science experiments," said Harrison, supervisor of the multi-agency Unified Narcotics Enforcement Team that operates out of Rapid City. "They are smaller, easier to do and very easy to make mobile, because you can fit the components in a fairly small space."

Thursday's discovery began as a routine traffic stop when a police officer spotted a green Ford Escort at the intersection of East Milwaukee and East Denver streets at 9:18 p.m., according to Rapid City Police spokeswoman Tarah Heupel.

A quick radio check on Nicholas Thompson revealed that he had outstanding warrants. The officer also found a substance that tested positive for methamphetamine in the 24-year-old's possession.

A search of Thompson's car uncovered all the components for a meth lab, including plastic bottles, tubing and pseudoephedrine. The lab was not being used to make meth at the time of the traffic stop, Heupel said.

The Rapid City Fire Department's Hazardous Materials team stood by while drug officers removed the equipment and materials from the trunk, Long said.

The discovery of a mobile meth lab is a rarity for the area, officials said.

"This was the first time the fire department was called to assist with a meth incident," said Brent Long, public information officer for the Rapid City Fire Department.

The chemicals used to produce methamphetamine are very unstable and produce noxious fumes, Long said.

Harrison said it has been unusual to find a meth lab of any type in the region, Harrison said. "It is rare; we have not come across a lot of meth labs recently," he said.

The compact size makes it easy for people to store the labs in vehicles, where detection is less likely and they can be moved quickly. If something goes wrong with the cooking process, a damaged vehicle is easier to replace than a home, Harrison said.

"We know that there are probably some of these new meth cooks around," Harrison said. The Pennington County Sheriff's Office and the Rapid City Police Department are training officers to be better prepared to detect the new labs, he said.

"Sioux Falls finds lots of these labs, a lot more than we do," Harrison said. "Our office is working very hard, and we're finding more of it. I don't think there's any more or less than what there's been."

Last year, the Rapid City Police Department recovered 42 pounds of meth, Heupel said.

Harrison urges anyone who suspects they know someone hiding a portable meth lab to contact police.

"These area a dangerous chemicals involved," Harrison said. The small meth labs are especially volatile because of their small size. When chemical pressure builds up in the small plastic bottles it will seek the weakest spot for relief. "That can cause it to shoot a flame up to several yards long."

Thompson is facing charges for possession of a controlled substance, possession of drug paraphernalia, and giving police a false identity. He is being held without bond in the Pennington County Jail.

A passenger in Thompson's car, Jeremiah Conley, 35, of Sturgis was arrested for a parole violation.