On March 9, 2006, George W. Bush signed into law the USA PATRIOT Improvement and Reauthorization Act. True to its name, the 2006 version of the PATRIOT Act was largely a reauthorization of the initial legislation, with the same general emphasis on combating “terror” in the name of homeland security. There was, however, one major exception. The new act included legislation focused on methamphetamine, the synthetic substance Newsweek had recently dubbed “America’s most dangerous drug” (Jefferson 2005).

In his comments during the signing, President Bush spoke directly about the “growing threat” of methamphetamine and the measures taken by the legislation to address it. “Meth is easy to make. It is highly addictive. It is ruining too many lives across our country,” President Bush stated. “The bill introduces commonsense safeguards that would make many of the ingredients used in manufacturing meth harder to obtain in bulk, and easier for law enforcement to track. . . . The bill also increases penalties for smuggling and selling of meth. Our nation is committed to protecting our citizens and our young people from the scourge of methamphetamine.”

Methamphetamine is the first drug to generate national concern in the United States in the twenty-first century. Its spread from the West Coast to the Midwest and now into the Southeast has prompted many to speak of the meth problem as an epidemic. And as with previous drug epidemics in the United States, the problem has been framed overwhelmingly as a law enforcement issue. The legislation contained in the PATRIOT Act, for instance, authorized double the amount of funding for law enforcement initiatives in “meth hot spots” as what it allocated for stopping the importation of meth from Mexico, improving the health of children affected by meth, assisting incarcerated female meth offenders with their children, and funding meth lab cleanup initiatives—combined. Thus the response to methamphetamine has involved repetition of the same punitive paradigm that has come to characterize efforts to address illicit drugs in the United States (Bertram et al. 1996).
This book examines contemporary concerns over methamphetamine in order to understand the abiding role played by illicit narcotics in American political life. Specifically, it examines the response to methamphetamine in one rural American community to show how the focus on narcotics has transformed the workings of law, the exercise of police power, and the practice of politics in the contemporary United States. Over the past century, the concern with narcotics has left its imprint on practically every corner of U.S. politics. Narcotics, a vernacular term used to refer generally to illicit drugs, have been and continue to be of significance to the election of officials, the administration of justice, the practice of law enforcement, the shaping of legal consciousness, the process of lawmaking and the formation of public policy (both foreign and domestic), the allocation of social services, the use of military force, the interpretation of law, and the behavior of the judiciary, to name but a few relevant areas of concern. Perennial political conflicts over race, class, gender, immigration, criminal justice, and social welfare, among others, have all been refracted through the lens of narcotics.

Nowhere, however, have the effects of the focus on narcotics been more acutely felt than in the legal system. Efforts taken to address narcotics through the law have brought about fundamental shifts in the legal culture of the United States itself. The criminal justice system has been at the forefront of these changes. Whether one looks at police, courts, or corrections, the criminalization of narcotics over the past century has left no component of this system untouched. Police forces have been reorganized and reoriented around drug enforcement; courts spend vast amounts of time and resources adjudicating drug offenders; and the corrections system, which has gone through an exponential period of growth in the last decades, now faces a range of bureaucratic, programmatic, and ethical challenges as its role in society has expanded and changed (Wacquant 2009a, 2009b).

These changes in the criminal justice system are only a part of a more fundamental shift that has taken place with regard to the state’s efforts to control, monitor, and shape the actions of its citizens by means of the concern with narcotics. That is, the focus on narcotics has transformed the exercise of what is known in legal terms as “the police power” of the state in the United States. When one hears the word “police,” the image that comes to mind is of the uniformed police force. But the exercise of the police power is a much broader enterprise. Generally speaking, the police power of the state refers to that modality of governance concerned with achieving and sustaining the “well-regulated society” (Novak 1996). To this end it is concerned with the broad objectives of maintaining order and avoiding future ills (Pasquino
As Markus Dubber writes, “The police power of the state is the power to order its constituents so as to maximize the ‘public welfare’ according to rules of expediency” (Dubber 2001, 833n.7). He goes on to quote William Blackstone’s definition of police from the influential *Commentaries on the Laws of England* as “the due regulation and domestic order of the kingdom: whereby the individuals of the state, like members of a well-governed family, are bound to conform their general behavior to the rules of propriety, good neighbourhood, and good manners: and to be decent, industrious, and inoffensive in their respective situations” (ibid.).

This definition highlights the fact that, in practice, the state is not alone in the exercise of police power. The analogy Blackwell draws between the kingdom and the “well-governed family,” as well as his reference to the “good neighbourhood,” “good manners,” and “rules of propriety,” illustrates that institutions such as the family, the community, even “society” itself are all likewise sites of police and sources of police power—even if only in potential. Thus, just as the uniformed police force is but one modality of the police power of the state, so, too, is the police power of the state but one modality of police power itself.

Similarly, while the police power is typically associated with law—the use of the term “law enforcement” in the United States to refer to the uniformed police force is perhaps the most overt instance of this association—this relationship is an ambiguous one. The two often function as separate modalities of governance (Dubber 2005, 3). And while the legitimation, exercise, and control of police power is in many ways rooted in law, law is not the source of police power in any straightforward way. Indeed, in some instances, law may function as a tool of police power, rather than the reverse. This reflects one of the defining features of the police power in Western political history: its tendency to defy definition or limitation.

Calibrating the relationship between law and police, at least insofar as these function in the service of governance, becomes the task of politics in this context. Governance is here “understood in the broad sense of techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Foucault 1997, 82). The introduction of illicit narcotics into this equation has resulted in a particular mode of political practice that I term *narcopolitics*, which works to rationalize the practices of governance in terms of the problems associated with narcotics.

From this perspective, the various approaches taken within the United States to address narcotics, including enforcement, treatment, and education, are not competing alternatives (as they are often treated in policy debates)
but components of a broad “illicit drug regulatory apparatus” (Stalcup 2006, 3). An apparatus, according to Michel Foucault, is composed of “discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, policy decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophic, moral, and philanthropic propositions” (quoted in Stalcup 2006, 3). As will be seen throughout this book, the illicit drug regulatory apparatus has been woven into the very fabric of American political life.

Treating the various approaches to narcotics regulation as components of the same apparatus should not be taken as a sign that each component functions equally. On the contrary, the illicit drug regulatory apparatus in the United States has long been organized around enforcement. The effect of this emphasis is that other components of the apparatus, such as treatment and education, are often incorporated into enforcement efforts. This particular approach to narcotics should not be accepted uncritically. The focus here, however, will not be on evaluating the effectiveness of this approach, but on situating its effects on the workings of law and the exercise of police power within the context of political life in the United States.

Methamphetamine is the most recent in a long line of substances to be framed as a national threat and treated as the horizon against which a broad array of interventions may be staged. To highlight this political role of methamphetamine is not to suggest that there is no reason for concern. On the contrary, journalists and scholars have documented how methamphetamine has caused significant harm to families and communities, particularly in rural areas (Weisheit and White 2009; Reding 2009; Owen 2007; Pine 2007). This work lends support to the findings of a report issued by the Mayo Clinic, which noted methamphetamine’s potential to unleash a “perfect storm” of medical and social complications (Lineberry and Bostwick 2006). Moreover, the idea that methamphetamine use has reached epidemic proportions is not without evidence. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), meth lab seizures in middle America increased 126 percent between 1999 and 2003. Meth-related treatment admissions increased 87 percent over the same period. And by 2004, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health was reporting that approximately 11.7 million Americans aged twelve and older had tried methamphetamine at least once during their lifetimes.

At the same time, there is evidence that the proliferation of methamphetamine is neither as new nor as extensive as has been suggested. Although Newsweek dubbed methamphetamine “America’s most dangerous drug” in 2005, this was not the first major article the magazine had published on the subject. In 1989 Newsweek published an article titled, “The Newest Drug
War,” in which it similarly stated that crank—a type of methamphetamine—was a growing problem in rural America (Baker et al. 1989; see also Weisheit and Fuller 2004, 52). There has also been something of a journalistic backlash to the initial coverage of methamphetamine, with articles that question the representation of the methamphetamine problem in earlier accounts (Shafer 2005, 2006; Valdez 2006; Egan 2009).

These debates resemble those that followed in the wake of other substances positioned as the “most dangerous” drug in the United States. In this regard, there is something familiar in both the initial frenzy over methamphetamine and the backlash. What is significant, however, is not the debates themselves but the wider political process of which they are a part. They are one small dynamic in the ongoing use of narcotics for the purposes of governance; they are part and parcel of narcopolitics.

**Narcopolitics**

Narcopolitics refers to any practice of governance whose rationalization lies in the concern with narcotics. My focus is the United States, the world’s largest consumer of illicit drugs (a.k.a. “narcotics”), but one could certainly find variations of the same phenomenon elsewhere (e.g., Campbell 2009; Penglase 2009; Moore 2007; Arias 2006; Taussig 2004; Zhou 1999). Indeed, because of the inherently global nature of the illicit trade in narcotics, narcopolitical practices are inevitably interconnected and can only ever be loosely contained in the discrete frame of the nation-state. Despite this inherent interconnectedness, however, the specific form that the narcotics trade and anti-narcotics practices take in a particular place can vary considerably, resulting in important differences, which an anthropology of narcopolitics such as this must be careful to articulate.

Contemporary narcopolitics began taking shape in the sixteenth century with the rise of the global trade in psychoactive substances (Courtwright 2001). The transformation of products such as sugar, opium, and tobacco into global commodities redefined the geopolitical map of the age and created new forms of sociality, labor, trade, governance, and experience (Mintz 1986; Ortiz 1995). Indeed, the commodity form is one of the defining features of contemporary narcotics, creating particularly modern anxieties about technology and personal enjoyment—pleasure in the age of mechanical reproduction (Derrida 2003). These global commodities, in turn, paved the way for new generations of psychoactive substances, including the heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and methamphetamine of today.
The practice of narcopolitics was a defining feature of American statecraft in the twentieth century (Musto 1999; Musto and Korsmeyer 2002; Bertram et al. 1996; Tracy and Acker 2004; Campbell 2000; Reinarman and Levine 1997; Agar and Reisinger 2002a, 2002b; Schneider 2008). Even before the formal declaration of the War on Drugs, the concern with narcotics provided an avenue through which the U.S. government could carry out a vast array of projects—everything from the regulation of schools and neighborhoods to the reshaping of military intervention and foreign policy to the reinterpretation of the constitution and other fundamental sources of legal rights. Citizens, too, participated in this process, using the issue of narcotics to make demands related to education, public safety, and the shaping of civic space. Today, narcotics continue to provide a robust medium through which broader anxieties over immigration, poverty, and intergenerational conflicts, to name just a few, are articulated and managed by both citizens and the state (Wacquant 2009a, 2009b; Andreas 2009; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Acker 2004; Moore and Haggerty 2001; Musto 1999).

If the topic of narcotics does not hold the prominent place it once did in American political discourse, such as during the Reagan administration’s escalation of the War on Drugs in the 1980s, this is not because the issue is no longer viable. On the contrary, the concern with narcotics is now such a taken-for-granted component of American political life that it provokes little debate or comment. Thus students in public schools accept the drug education they receive through the DARE (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) program, as well as the regular drug searches performed by police, as routine components of their educational experience. Similarly, the rampant use of drug testing to manage groups as diverse as athletes, inmate populations, and factory workers strikes no one as odd or unreasonable. Rather, it seems like a commonsense strategy for a society that appears to be perennially plagued by drugs.

This book counteracts the “hidden-in-plain-sight” quality of narcopolitics by providing an ethnographic analysis of the practices at the heart of the contemporary American narcopolitical state. This ethnographic approach underscores both the forms these practices take and the ways in which they are lived. The focus is on methamphetamine because of its current position as America’s most dangerous drug. Like previous drug threats, it is methamphetamine’s addictiveness, availability, association with crime and violence, and capacity to cause harm to users and communities, regardless of social standing, that has been emphasized (Jefferson 2005).

Despite these similarities, however, there is much that distinguishes methamphetamine. Unlike comparable drugs such as cocaine and heroin, meth
does not need to be imported. It can be manufactured locally using everyday household items such as cold tablets, iodine, and drain cleaner, which are then “cooked” using “recipes” readily available on the Internet. “Meth labs”—the name given to places where methamphetamine is manufactured—have been found everywhere: in hotel rooms, cars, and even suitcases, though ordinary homes located inconspicuously in rural areas remain the most common location. Furthermore, methamphetamine is having a disproportionate effect on rural areas, in precisely those places assumed to be least susceptible to such social problems as drugs, addiction, and crime. Finally, concern over methamphetamine has emerged at a time when the public feels acutely ambivalent about the War on Drugs. While the majority of Americans feel that fighting the drug war is still necessary, they no longer feel it can be won (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press [hereafter PEW] 2001). Even so, though methamphetamine has a unique profile, the prevailing response has emphasized the same narcopolitical strategies used against previous drug threats.

The location of the study is Baker County, a small, rural community in West Virginia. Between 2006 and 2007 I conducted ethnographic research looking at the methamphetamine problem there. For more than a year I combed through archives, spoke with local residents, and observed the impact meth was having on the local community. During this time I was particularly attuned to the way community members responded to methamphetamine. I watched as prosecuting priorities of the courts shifted toward meth offenders, increasing workloads, and bringing new people into the criminal justice system; as community groups advocated for expanded drug testing in schools, causing tension between teachers and students, parents and children; as rumors circulated over who had been seen going to receive treatment for addiction at the local mental health facility; and as addicts, driven into a life of crime by their use of methamphetamine, were sent to overcrowded regional jails and state prisons where they received little medical treatment. Upon their release they struggled to find a place for themselves in the community where they lived with the double stigma of both their criminal record and their addiction. Attending to these developments, I documented how narcopolitical practices were deployed in Baker County in the wake of methamphetamine.

The prevailing response to methamphetamine in Baker County demonstrates how the practices and logics of narcopolitics have become embedded in everyday expressions of political life in the United States—even in those places, like Baker County, assumed to stand at some remove from the
problem of illicit narcotics. This includes such basic components of political life as the legitimation of state authority, the exercise of police power, the upholding of rights, and the provision of order and security. Each chapter illustrates a different instance in which these basic political practices took place vis-à-vis the concern with methamphetamine.

This analysis reveals three key features of contemporary narcopolitics:

1. **The Targeting of Substances and Their Effects, Rather than People and Their Actions, to Structure the Field of Intervention.** The prevailing U.S. drug control strategy has been based on the assumption that the surest way of countering the negative impact of narcotics is to limit—and ultimately eliminate—their availability. As a result, the various elements of the narcopolitical order, from drug laws to police practices to judicial decisions, are united by the common focus on the substance and its effects as the object and means of regulation and intervention. This concern is ancillary to the narcopolitical practices that focus on people and their actions, such as the arrest of specific buyers, sellers, distributors, traffickers, and users of the drug. To be sure, the dramatic expansion of the U.S. prison population that occurred with the escalation of the War on Drugs in the 1980s involved the prosecution of people. Yet it is only through the targeting of the drugs themselves that these arrests have been possible.

Take, for example, the spike in the use of possession offenses—such as drug possession—to prosecute criminal offenders that occurred over the latter half of the twentieth century. According to Markus Dubber, this use of possession offenses marks “the end of criminal law as we know it.” This is because the policing of possession is concerned neither with crime, understood as the “serious violation of another’s rights,” nor with law, understood as a “state run system of interpersonal conflict resolution,” but with threats, understood here as the potential harm posed by an illicit object—and by extension, the possessor of that object—such as a drug (Dubber 2001, 834). The objective of the criminal justice system here is not to remedy a harm done but to neutralize a potential threat, in this case, by disrupting the circulation and use of an illicit object.

This approach toward the policing of possession offenses marks a shift away from the retributive concerns of traditional criminal law and toward a focus on prevention and incapacitation. This focus both drives and is driven by the focus on possession. Furthermore, it has turned U.S. criminal justice into a system of “penal police” concerned less with punishing crimes than policing
threats. “Persons matter neither as the source, nor as the target, of threats,” Dubber states. “Penal police is a matter between the state and threats” (ibid.). Similarly, several landmark Supreme Court decisions regarding the use of drug detection technologies during police searches have redefined such basic aspects of political life as the right to privacy and protection from unreasonable search and seizure. These have taken the threat posed by drugs themselves for their justification. This has enabled police to carry out searches that would otherwise be unthinkable apart from the concern with narcotics (Marks 2007). Thus, though it is people, ultimately, who are sent to prison, have their belongings searched, or are forced to submit to a drug test, it is the specific materiality of the drug and its effects, whether real or imagined, that serves as the precondition for these interventions. And as we will see with methamphetamine, this has come to include the precursor chemicals out of which the drug is made.

2. The simultaneous use of multiple methods of intervention to do the work of narcotics control. The uniformed police officer is the most visible sign of both the state’s police powers generally and of drug enforcement specifically. But this figure is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the broad array of practices deployed to control the flow of drugs. For example, one of the most significant pieces of narcotics legislation is the Harrison Act of 1914. This act created a federal system of drug regulation that quickly shaped the drug markets of the era. The Harrison Act was not criminal law, however, but tax law. Nevertheless, its passage fundamentally altered the landscape in which narcotics were used, policed, and traded, setting the stage for the criminalization of narcotics that has characterized the U.S. approach ever since (Acker 2002).

More recent antinarcotics legislation has likewise attempted to engage the governmental capacities of the state on multiple registers. Legislation enacted during the Reagan administration, for instance, involved the allocation of almost $2 billion to address illicit narcotics. Specific initiatives included a drug-testing program for federal employees, stiffer federal sentences for drug offenders, including the death penalty for so-called drug kingpins, continued sponsorship of international drug eradication programs, and penalties against countries identified as drug producers who did not cooperate with U.S. eradication efforts (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994).

Increased use of the military has also been a hallmark of the campaign against illicit narcotics. In 1981 Congress revised a century-old law that prohibited the military from engaging in civilian law enforcement. As a result,
the military was allowed to “loan equipment to the civilian police, train law enforcement personnel, and directly assist in some aspects of interdiction efforts” (Kraska 2003, 301). The law also authorized military officials to arrest traffickers in other countries (these powers were later suspended following the controversial arrest of Manuel Noriega).

More recent efforts have tended to downplay the military approach. The two most recent administrations have emphasized treatment, education, community, and faith-based initiatives. In the summer of 2009, the Obama administration “drug czar” Gil Kerlikowski announced that they would no longer be using the phrase “War on Drugs,” in large part to signify the administration’s shift toward a more public-health–oriented approach. “It is a change,” Kerlikowski stated. “The change in emphasis is to look at this as a public health problem. Law enforcement and prevention and treatment are all big parts of it. But clearly, the public health problem is the way we should be viewing this” (U.S. Outlines New Drug War Strategy 2009).

And yet the same year saw the Obama administration issue the National Southwest Border Counternarcotics Strategy, a transnational law enforcement effort strictly focused on fighting Mexican drug cartels and stopping the flow of drugs and guns along the U.S. border with Mexico. Similarly, such enforcement efforts increasingly overlap with other military conflicts, particularly in Afghanistan where the DEA is poised to assume an even greater role in the conflict (Associated Press 2009).

3. THE BRIDGING OF PUNITIVE AND ACTUARIAL MODES OF GOVERNANCE. When drugs are constituted in political discourse as threats, there is an inevitable blurring of morality-based and risk-based reasoning that takes place. The moral opposition to drug use in the United States is well known. Its puritan heritage continues to cast a long shadow over the way particular substances are valued. Those taken to increase productivity tend to be embraced unproblematically while those taken primarily for pleasure are largely disdained (Levine 1978; Valverde 1998). As a result, illicit drugs are typically cast in moral terms, and this moral evaluation extends to those involved with drugs. The “drug dealer” has become a particularly maligned “figure of criminality” (Rafael 1999) in the public imagination (Garland 2001). Drug dealers are cast as “wicked individuals who have lost all legal rights and all moral claims upon us” (ibid., 192). This fuels a particularly punitive and “expressive” approach to drugs and drug-related crime, one that is “overtly moralistic, uncompromising, and concerned to assert the force of sovereign power” (ibid., 191; cf. Bertram et al. 1996).
But while drugs continue to incite moral opposition, they have also enabled practices for managing drug offenders that are not morality-based but risk-based. Such practices are not punitive but actuarial. They view criminal involvement with illicit narcotics less as a moral failing to be reproached than as a risk factor to be managed. A person’s involvement with drugs is understood to increase the likelihood of their involvement with crime (beyond the criminal act of the drug possession and use itself). Drug possession is thus constituted as both a crime in itself and a predictor of additional and/or future criminality.

This association has given rise to such techniques as drug testing, drug sweeps, and drug courier profiling, all of which target drugs as a way to manage criminality and other associated risks. These techniques are now a central component of the way the criminal justice system polices threats and also does the work of risk management. From the risk-based perspective, then, narcotics are targeted, not because they are inherently bad (at least not just) but because there is a statistical (as well as discursive) correlation between drugs and crime. Thus institutional incentives make narcotics the focus of criminal justice practice just as much as a sense of moral outrage (Feeley and Simon 1992, 1994).

The attractiveness of narcopolitics is its ability to bridge both the morality-based and risk-based framings of narcotics and their corresponding punitive and actuarial approaches. This creates a potent system in which moral objections fuel the continued politicization of narcotics and sustain a largely punitive model of intervention, while simultaneously enabling the development and implementation of ever-more sophisticated forms of surveillance and “offender management” focused on mitigating risk.

These key features of contemporary narcopolitics form the backdrop to the response to methamphetamine that occurred in Baker County. They provided a general foundation for the more specific interventions that took place.

**Methamphetamine Comes to Baker County**

West Virginia shares many of the same characteristics as other states that have been heavily impacted by methamphetamine. It is one of the whitest and most rural states in the United States. Its population is also one of the poorest and least educated, with 18 percent of residents living below the poverty line.

The DEA’s profile of West Virginia notes that its proximity to major metropolitan areas, including Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., makes it a strategic location for drug trafficking. The state’s location, near
the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, just miles from where I conducted my research, also positions it at the center of national and international drug trafficking operations. Moreover, even though the law enforcement officers I interviewed would not officially confirm it, I was told that the Shenandoah Valley was part of a larger meth trafficking pipeline that stretched down through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Texas, and into Mexico. In short, West Virginia’s rural character, its poverty, and its proximity to major metropolitan areas and drug trafficking routes made it fertile ground for methamphetamine to take root as it had in other areas (Ove 2006).

I chose to focus on West Virginia, rather than on a state where meth had already had a significant impact such as Missouri, Oregon, or Hawaii, in order to see the methamphetamine problem as it emerged. Conducting research in West Virginia between 2006 and 2007 provided precisely this kind of opportunity. At this time, West Virginia’s methamphetamine problem was just beginning to gain widespread recognition. Between 2003 and 2005 the number of meth lab incidents statewide tripled, causing great concern. Federal organizations such as the Drug Enforcement Agency targeted West Virginia as the leading edge of the methamphetamine epidemic as it moved eastward. A growing appreciation of the Shenandoah Valley’s significance in the regional and global meth trade added to the concern. Indeed, as I began my research, a Federal Drug Task Force was wrapping up a two-year operation in the area focused on disrupting local networks of meth production and distribution between local dealers in West Virginia and producers and suppliers in the Shenandoah Valley.

In response, West Virginia lawmakers, particularly the newly elected governor, Joe Manchin, targeted the methamphetamine problem for regulatory intervention. They followed the lead of lawmakers in other states and passed legislation increasing the criminal penalties for meth-related crimes and strengthening the regulations on precursor chemicals used in the methamphetamine production process. These regulatory interventions involved the mobilization of significant sectors of the population, who were given new responsibilities under the legislation, particularly with regard to the monitoring of those precursor chemicals used in the methamphetamine production process. Conducting my research in West Virginia at this time thus allowed me to observe an epidemic “in-the-making,” as it were, enabling me to see how people responded in the midst of the methamphetamine problem rather than in its aftermath.  

I focused my research on a cluster of five rural counties in the eastern part of West Virginia. This area sits just north of the Shenandoah Valley of
Virginia. To better insure the anonymity of my subjects, however, I have chosen to write about the area as if it were one county that I call Baker County. Like other parts of rural America, this area continues to undergo significant economic, demographic, and social changes. Small-scale farming used to be the primary occupation of most residents. Such farming is no longer viable, so many now work in the local poultry industry either as growers, drivers, or workers in the processing plant. Many others commute to work at similar factory jobs an hour or more away. The area's proximity to Washington, D.C., roughly three hours away, has made it an increasingly popular location for retirees from the city, as well as for tourists looking for weekend getaways. Some of these people came to the area shortly after 9/11, seeing safety in the area's rural location.

There is likewise an increasing Latino/Latina presence in the area, as immigrants, largely from Mexico and Puerto Rico, move there to work, primarily in the poultry industry. Along with the influx of “Mexicans,” there is also a rising population of “Baltimore people”—white, mostly poor individuals and families seeking a new life in the rural setting away from the drugs and violence of the city. While local residents who were native to the area were still proud to call it home, there was nevertheless an underlying sense that the best years of the community might be behind them. Social changes such as these were often spoken of in terms of moral decline. I was told numerous times about the dwindling of parenting skills, of ethics and morals, and of common sense. “This used to be a real nice place to live,” my neighbor, Elmer Jones, told me as we chatted on his porch one summer evening, looking at the home of the “Baltimore people” across the street with its crumbling facade and unkempt lawn. “Nowadays, people just don’t know how to take care of themselves.”

Any discussion of methamphetamine usually took place during talks about these more widespread changes. For instance, residents said repeatedly there was no family that had not been affected by drugs in some way. Concern over methamphetamine was particularly acute. Police officers I spoke with estimated that anywhere from 50 to 90 percent of all the crime they dealt with, such as breaking and entering, burglary, and domestic violence, had something to do with methamphetamine.

Such perceptions were not just limited to law enforcement. Those in the mental health field—substance abuse counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists—spoke of increasingly unmanageable caseloads, as did social workers, health department employees, and those in child protection services. Administrators at the poultry processing plant instituted random drug test-
ing as a standard practice to control the use of meth by their workers. They expressed frustration at the high turnover rates that resulted from employees either testing positive for drugs and being fired, or quitting rather than submit to a drug test.

This concern among professionals was mirrored in the community. Anxieties over the rise in methamphetamine use were particularly high. These anxieties were consistently articulated as a concern over crime. Local residents indicated that they had not experienced a dramatic rise in crime per se, but that they had begun to suspect that much of the crime they read about in the newspaper, or heard about from friends and neighbors, was somehow related to methamphetamine. Articulating their concerns in this way prompted residents to turn to the law, rather than to religion, public health, or some other institutional context, to address the growing methamphetamine problem, albeit in different ways.

Some were working to make law enforcement more accountable for handling the drug problem. One group of citizens came together and formed the community watch group “Concerned Citizens United Against Crime.” This group formed shortly after a drug-related shooting at the local VFW. Members demanded that police take a harder stand on drugs and drug-related crime, monitored courts to make sure that those convicted of drug crimes received appropriate sentences, and prompted discussion about the lack of treatment resources available in the community for addicts and their families.

In other areas, citizens turned to the law in less formal ways to express their concerns over meth-related crime. Individuals called police with anonymous tips about possible dealers, reported signs of meth production discovered on their property or in the woods, and paid close attention to the behavior of their neighbors, especially newcomers, for any signs that drug dealing or using was taking place.

And elsewhere, there was little more than a feeling that “something should be done” about the growing drug problem, and a sense that law enforcement was responsible for doing it. Though unwilling to assist personally for fear of reprisal from the family members and neighbors on whom they’d be reporting, these residents nevertheless become frustrated when police were slow to arrest someone that, as I often heard, “everybody knows is selling drugs.”

Such frustration often led to speculation about who was really behind the rising drug problem in the community. Rumors circulated about the role the mayor, the sheriff, and other officials were playing in facilitating the local drug trade. Residents whispered stories about suspicious nighttime rendezvous at the area’s tiny airport that were presumed to be drug related. A local
journalist caused a major stir when she wrote a column about a group of attorneys who were rumored to be involved in the drug trade. No evidence ever arose to substantiate the rumors, and the officials in question were quick to dismiss them as nothing more than gossip. However, when someone who, in the eyes of the community, should have gone to jail did not, it just seemed to further substantiate the rumors, maintaining the suspicions of many that the local drug problem was as bad as it was because the officials in charge of addressing it were actually involved in it.

And in the midst of all this concern and speculation were those struggling with methamphetamine addiction. Options for these individuals were extremely limited. Although there was a regional treatment facility, its scope, like similar facilities in rural areas, was modest. It was a strictly outpatient facility, with only a handful of certified substance-abuse counselors and three licensed psychiatrists who were responsible for providing mental health services for the entire region.

Inpatient treatments and hospitalizations were available only in larger cities, the nearest being one hundred miles away. There were those in the community who made daily trips to these facilities to maintain their treatment, but many more went without, often ending up enmeshed in the criminal justice system after committing a crime to sustain their habits. Further complicating the issue was the sheer difficulty of treating methamphetamine addiction itself. Local addiction counselors estimated their success rate with methamphetamine users at 30 percent, a figure that program participants felt was grossly inflated. Thus the limited effectiveness of treatment, and the difficulty of its implementation in rural areas, increased the probability that the criminal justice system—rather than the family, the church, or some other institution—would assume responsibility for the meth addict and his or her rehabilitation.

Methods

I conducted my research using an ethnographic approach. Information was assembled in three ways: (1) through the collection and analysis of all known criminal cases involving methamphetamine, (2) through regular court attendance in each of the five counties and interviews with individuals involved in court cases, and (3) through interviews and conversations with more than one hundred individuals in the five counties who were most knowledgeable about the local meth situation, including those who worked in a profession that dealt with meth use and its associated crimes, participated in one of the
citizen action organizations focused on addressing the meth problem, or had been personally affected by meth in some way, real or imagined.

In ethnography it is always hard to know where to begin. I began by exploring the experiences and responses to the problems associated with methamphetamine among those most involved with addressing it. I made connections with key administrators and professionals working in institutions that were addressing the methamphetamine problem directly. These included the local hospital, courthouse, police station, schools, and churches. The goal here was to understand the professional bureaucracy in place for dealing with methamphetamine in the area.

I conducted interviews with key officials and administrators within these institutions. I mapped the bureaucratic processes in which they were involved, such as the process governing a person’s arrest, trial, and sentencing, the protocol teachers followed when they suspected a student of using drugs, and the use of drug testing by administrators within a range of institutions to manage the populations under their supervision. Building on this work, I moved from the professional context to the world of ordinary citizens. The goal here was to understand the effect methamphetamine was having on everyday life, first of all by participating in the activities of a number of community action groups that were focused on methamphetamine. These included the group Concerned Citizens United Against Crime previously mentioned, as well as another group called the Substance Abuse Prevention Coalition. I attended meetings and interviewed members of these groups, paying attention to the ways they talked about drugs, crime, and addiction, and the kinds of action they were involved with or wanted to see taken to address the meth problem.

I also participated as fully as possible in the life of the local community. I sang in the community choir, went to Bible studies, and served as a judge in the elementary school social studies fair. I volunteered at the nursing home on bingo night and attended community events, such as the annual summer festival and the weekly bluegrass jam session at the senior citizen community center. Participating in community events this way gave me a more robust sense of life in the area. It also demonstrated the pervasiveness of the concern about methamphetamine, as conversations with local residents often and quickly turned to the topic.

Over the course of the research period I conducted detailed “person-centered” (Levy and Hollan 1998) interviews with a small number of recovering methamphetamine addicts. I documented in detail the experiences of these individuals with methamphetamine. In addition to obtaining detailed
personal histories, I recorded each person’s version of his or her addiction experience as well as accounts of arrest, conviction, and/or rehabilitation as applicable.

Additionally, I examined the case files on individuals convicted of a meth-related crime. These files included the history and full legal proceedings of each individual's case, transcriptions of confessions, preliminary evaluations by a psychologist and probation officer, letters of support (or vilification) from friends and other community members, full transcription of court proceedings if the case had gone to trial, and, if the person was convicted, letters from the person to the judge asking him or her to reconsider. Examining these files provided a crucial supplement to my interview work, enabling me to see the way these individuals were figured as criminals in the criminal justice system and beyond.

Proceeding in this way, this book provides a detailed account of how one community responded to the methamphetamine problem. It shows how, in their response, the residents of Baker County drew from patterns of enforcement that are now deeply engrained in American political life. It is these patterns of enforcement, and the politics by which they are sustained, that I term “narcopolitics.” Understanding the significant role played by narcopolitics in contemporary American political life, particularly with regard to the workings of law and police power, is the focus of what follows.