

Using Fiction In a Real Fight Against Drugs

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Body

California officials have adopted the idea of fotonovelas, the small picture books popular in Mexico, in hopes of persuading immigrant laborers to resist the easy-money temptation of the methamphetamine trade.

Thousands in the Central Valley, a broad agricultural swath that runs up the middle of the state, have read the story of Jose, a farmworker who endangers his family by working for a **drug** ring. The story, "No Vale La Pena," or "It's Not Worth It," has also inspired a Spanish-language film, and officials from other states have requested copies of both projects.

Community leaders in and around Merced, about 130 miles southeast of San Francisco, saw the fotonovela concept as an effective way to reach immigrant workers.

"We were trying to get that message across to a population that has a very low literacy level and that's really isolated," said a public relations executive, Virginia Madueno, who created the booklet.

The Central Valley is a primary distribution point for methamphetamine, according to a Department of Justice report released last month.

Mexican **drug** cartels have begun to dominate the trade in the area. Sheriff Mark N. Pazin of Merced County said cartels accounted for more than 80 percent of the arrests on methamphetamine-production charges in 2003. The federal report said the cartels were trying to expand into other areas with large immigrant populations.

"No Vale La Pena" ends sadly. Jose, recruited by a **drug** lord, hides his methamphetamine laboratory from his wife and exposes their daughter to a fatal dose of chemicals.

The first publishing run, of 15,000 copies, was soon exhausted, said Ben Duran, the president of Merced College, who helped create the storybook **using** donations. More were printed, and the book is now available at many supermarkets catering to Hispanics across California.

Last year, Mr. Duran started working on a film based on the story, styled to look like a Mexican soap opera. He played the **drug** kingpin in the film, made with help from the sheriff and \$100,000 in federal financing. It has been shown in classrooms, at nurses' conventions and at commercial theaters in several states.

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