



**UK NATIONAL PROBLEM PROFILE: COMMERCIAL
CULTIVATION OF CANNABIS REPORT 2014**

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Foreword

I am pleased to publish the 2014 UK National Profile for the Commercial Cultivation of Cannabis. This is the fourth UK-wide profile that has been produced. It aims to present the changing national picture in relation to the scale and nature of cannabis cultivation and the response of law enforcement.

The geographical area covered in this profile encompasses the United Kingdom, including police forces in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and uses data from 2011 to 2014. It has been produced using voluntary intelligence returns and crime data collated by UK police forces and other enforcement agencies involved in tackling the supply and production of cannabis on a commercial scale. My thanks go to the many contributing organisations and departments for their participation and assistance in producing this profile.

This profile shows that the commercial cultivation of cannabis continues to pose a significant risk to the UK.

The diversification of organised crime groups (OCGs) into commercial cannabis cultivation continues. With the UK street price of illegal drugs among the highest in Europe, a significant proportion of OCGs within the UK are now engaged in commercial cultivation. This report explores their continuing involvement, highlighting that commercial cultivation is used as a means to fund other criminal activity, including distribution of class A drugs, money laundering, human trafficking and illegal immigration.

Coercion and increasing levels of violence have been attributed to commercial cannabis cultivation hence focusing solely on the cultivation and supply element risks overlooking the true threat, risk and harm caused by cannabis cultivation which we know includes links to other serious and organised crime and human trafficking.

This profile presents an analysis of the current threat from commercial cannabis cultivation and provides evidence to assist future planning and decision-making for a preventative and enforcement activity.

Bill Jephson

T/Assistant Chief Constable

Executive Summary

Key Findings

- Evidence indicates that there is a continued link between commercial cultivation, modern slavery and people living without legal permission to remain in the UK, including the exploitation of vulnerable adults and children.
- OCGs involved in cannabis supply are frequently involved in the supply of other drugs, hence cannabis users risk being persuaded into the use of other class A drugs.
- Increased violence has been attributed to those involved in the cultivation of cannabis, including aggravated burglaries and 'taxation' of rival gangs. Risks at sites being used for cultivation of cannabis could include improvised traps installed to protect the plants.
- The majority of identified offenders are white British men aged between 25 and 34 years of age. Whilst crime data continues to show a decline in activity among South East Asian offenders and OCGs, intelligence returns confirm they still play a significant role in the cultivation of cannabis. Reports suggest a new trend of cultivation sites being controlled by white British OCGs, which employ Vietnamese nationals who are forced to work in cultivation.
- The size of commercial cultivation sites continues to be predominantly small and located in residential dwellings, with offenders controlling a number of sites, often across large geographical areas.
- There is a potential increased risk of fires associated with small cultivation sites.
- The average number of plants recovered per annum over the three year period was just over a quarter of a million with 2013/14 recording the highest at 276,676.
- The number of commercial cultivation cannabis offences has decreased by 5.6 per cent in 2013/14 when compared with the previous year. This also follows a decrease of 3.7 per cent between 2011/12 and 2012/13.
- Law enforcement continues to tackle the scale of commercial cultivation of cannabis at a local, regional and national level, concentrating on the threat, risk and harm posed.

Definitions

The following defines commercial cultivation of cannabis:

- Twenty- five or more cannabis plants, at any stage of growth (germination), are being or have been grown OR...
- There is evidence of a cannabis farm.

The definition of a cannabis farm is:

The premises, or part therein, has been adapted to such an extent that normal usage would be inhibited and usually present within the premises, or part therein, are items solely concerned for the production of cannabis, i.e.:

- Hydroponics system
- High intensity lighting
- Ventilation / Extraction fans
- Any other associated equipment, and / or
- Electricity meter bypassed (abstraction of electricity)

In addition to the above, the overall appearance of the venue, together with available intelligence also indicates if the site was, is, or is intended to be a cannabis farm, irrespective of the number of plants present on the site. For example there may be no plants but the site has been made ready to commence cultivation.

Multi-commodity and poly-dealers have been referred to within this document. These terms refer to dealers supplying more than one type of drug such as cannabis and heroin into the recreational market at the same time.

Individuals involved in the cultivation of cannabis have been referred to throughout as farmers or growers, with these terms used in existing research on the commercial cultivation of cannabis.

Types of cannabis

Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in the UK¹ and comes in three common forms (resin, compressed powder and herbal) and one rarer form (oil). Resin is collected from cannabis plants and compressed into hard blocks that vary in colour from light brown to black. It is often described as having a distinctive sweet smell and can vary in texture from being soft and flexible to hard and crumbly.

The compressed powder form is commonly referred to as 'pollen' and is compressed into blocks. This form tends to be of higher potency than resin and has a more powdery surface texture. Herbal cannabis comprises small dried leaves, dried flowering heads or a mix of the two. From a market perspective, the flowering tops/buds (skunk) and herbal leaves are supplied as separate products, commonly attracting different users and commanding different prices. Whilst the leaves look like dried herbs, the flowers can vary in colour and may often be dusted with pollen. The term "skunk" is often used for the more potent or specialist forms, containing more tetrahydrocannabinol (active ingredient) or having the capacity to generate a range of user experiences and psychoactive effects. There are currently hundreds of 'branded' skunk options, commonly produced in the Netherlands, but becoming more prevalent within UK domestic grow sites.² The fourth type, oil, is less common in the United Kingdom. Sold in small vials, it is often much more potent.

The potency of cannabis is measured by the main ingredient in cannabis that is responsible for the psychoactive, or mood altering effects; tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

¹ Drug Misuse: Findings from 2012/13 crime survey England and Wales

² NCA Return

Crime Trends

Our data is based on returned statistics from force areas based on: crime data, drug seizures, self – reported use, plants recovered, identification of factories, equipping of premises, acquisition of farmers and fire service data.

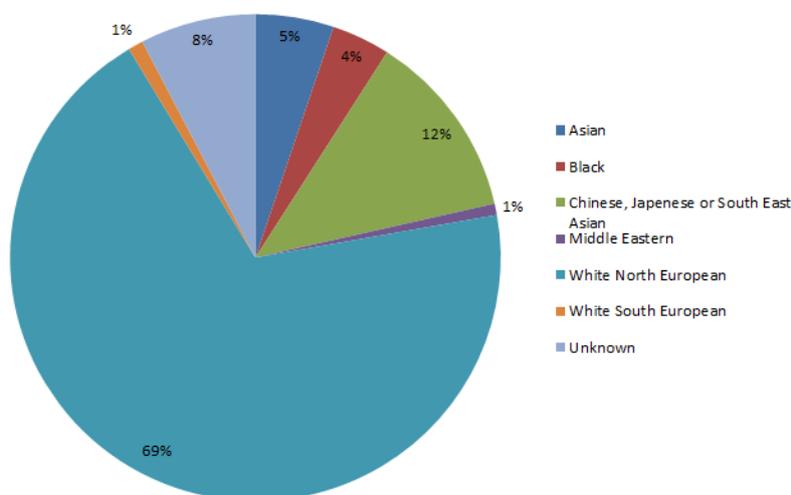
Crime data

The 2010 National Profile reported 6,866 offences of commercial cultivation in 2009/10, increasing by 15 per cent over the following two years.³ Based on those forces that provided three years' data for this profile, there was a 3.7 per cent reduction between 2011/12 and 2012/13 and a 5.6 per cent reduction between 2012/13 and 2013/14. These figures equate to an annual average of five offences recorded per 100,000 population.

Seasonal trends in reporting were not identified. This is understandable as cannabis production is not driven by external environmental factors.

Of those forces reporting increased offences, some have dedicated dismantling teams and forensic strategies in place to identify farms and recover plants. These specialist teams provide detailed local profiles; identify intelligence links and offenders; and ascertain the source of the equipment used. This is likely to have prompted their increased recording.

During the three year period, 6,010 offenders were identified as involved in the commercial cultivation of cannabis.⁴ Offenders continue to be predominantly male⁵, accounting for 88.5 per cent of all offenders, and largely white North European (70 per cent of all offenders)⁶ most frequently aged between 25 and 34. There has been a decline in the proportion of South East Asian offenders over the last three years, now representing approximately 12 per cent of all offenders recorded⁷.



Many offenders are local established suppliers, often living at the address. In line with the previous profile, little evidence is provided of children being present at cultivation sites.

Previous profiles have often highlighted the role of South East Asian OCGs in cannabis cultivation. Crime data currently shows a decline in their activity, but intelligence returns and operations suggest that South East Asians continue to play a significant role. Reports also suggest that migrants often enter the country

³ UK National Problem Profile – Commercial Cultivation of Cannabis 2012

⁴ Based on returns from 32 Police Forces that provided data

⁵ Based on returns from 30 Police Forces that provided data

⁶ Based on returns from 27 Police Forces that provided data

⁷ Based on returns from 27 Police Forces that provided data

with no intention of cultivating cannabis. However, once in the UK, it becomes an easy way for them to pay back large debts to lenders who threaten their families and lifestyles back home. Often with interest rates of 2-3 per cent per month, they have little option but to turn to crime, with commercial cultivation often earning them enough in one year to repay their debts and send money home to their family.

The illegal drugs market remains attractive to OCGs within the UK with street prices being among the highest in Europe. Police forces' organised crime strategies continue to enable them to rank OCGs and highlight those connected to the cultivation of commercial cannabis. As with the previous profile, forces commented on connections between their local offenders and other areas of the country showing continued cross border criminality involved in large scale commercial cannabis cultivation, some cultivation sites controlled by the same offenders across a number of force boundaries.

Drug Seizure Data

Drug seizure data is recorded in England and Wales by the police and Border Force. The majority of class B seizures are for cannabis, down 10 per cent from 169,192 seizures in 2011/12 to 151,843 in 2012/13. Decreases were noted in all three types of cannabis recorded; herbal (down 7per cent), plant (down 1 per cent) and resin (down 42 per cent)⁸.

Self-Reported Use

Cannabis continues to be the most commonly used drug in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. England and Wales reporting that whilst the number of people using illegal drugs had increased, the number using cannabis had remained stable since 2010. Scotland continues to report decreases across Class A, B and the use of cannabis. Substance misuse strategies are currently in place nationally to aid in the continued downward trend of substance misuse, particularly in relation to those aged under 18.

Plants recovered and the cost of cannabis

The average number of plants recovered per annum across the 27 forces that provided data was just over a quarter of a million with 2013/14 the highest at 276,676.

Of those forces able to provide average street prices for an ounce of herbal cannabis, prices ranged from £50 to £280 across the three years, averaging £160/ounce consistently over two years. Based on this average, the 2013/14 plant seizures would have attracted an estimated street value of £62,460,528.

Property Type



Domestic dwellings remain the preferred location type for large scale cannabis cultivation, accounting for 90 per cent of all commercial cannabis factories identified during the three year reporting period. Industrial/ commercial properties comprise of around 7 per cent and farm/agricultural locations the majority of the remainder. Factories have been identified in dog kennels, public houses, converted industrial units/warehouses and containers buried under the ground.

⁸ Home Office: seizures of drugs in England and Wales 2012/13

Identification of Factories

The most common methods of identification continue to be through intelligence-led operations and police responding to other offences. Factories have also occasionally been discovered as a result of fires breaking out within properties; these most likely caused by the abstraction of the electricity supply.

Forces have identified a need to educate landlords and in light of increased reports of smaller residential dwellings being converted into cannabis factories. Publicity campaigns have been delivered to increase public awareness. A Crimestoppers initiative in 2014 saw 150,000 scratch and sniff cards posted to homes countrywide which were designed to raise awareness of the smell of cannabis and other signs which may indicate a cultivation site.

Equipping of Premises

Improved cultivation methods, including indoor techniques and selective plant breeding, have resulted in faster growing and higher yielding plants than ever before. This is likely to have contributed to increased levels of domestic production.

The internet is a fast and accessible way for individuals to access cultivation equipment and information. Sites list books for sale including, "A Complete Growers Guide" and "The Cannabis Grow Bible". There are a number of legitimate websites that allow individuals to purchase hydroponic and other cultivation equipment legally.

Considerable effort is often made by OCGs to convert premises. This includes using sophisticated insulation to divert heat.

Acquisition of Farmers

Historically, cannabis had often been imported into the UK by traffickers from parts of South East Asia. Since the 2010 national profile, it has been highlighted that a significant amount of cannabis is now cultivated within the UK on a commercial scale. Despite this, there still remains an inextricable link between farmers who tend to the plants in commercial cultivations and modern slavery. These farmers are often seen by traffickers as low risk because of their anonymity - when discovered, they are often dealt with as residents without legal permission or prosecuted rather than treated as victims of trafficking.

Where a potential victim of modern slavery is identified and they are also suspected to be illegally in the United Kingdom, their situation as a victim is addressed and they should be referred for support appropriate to their needs. Forces have been training officers, staff and partner agencies about how to deal with such cases whilst operating within government guidance via the National Crime Agency UK Human Trafficking Centre.

White British OCGs are becoming more involved in the supply of cannabis as a means to fund further criminal activities and spread investment across poly-commodity activity. They often employ individuals as farmers who want to pay off their accumulated drugs debts.

Fire Service data

Properties used as cannabis factories generally come to the attention of fire and rescue services as a result of police asking for their assistance having discovered a factory. Fire services have not reported a rise in fires linked to cannabis factories; however, a small number of incidents have been reported in the media. Some do come to the notice of the fire service through members of the public reporting a fire or the smell of burning coming from properties. The main factors leading to greater risk of fire include offenders bypassing electrical meters when powering heat lamps and offenders bypassing gas meters to generate Co2 powered equipment via natural gas.

Other Criminality

Illegal Immigration (Residents without legal permission)

Despite research showing a move towards British nationals cultivating cannabis on a commercial scale, we continue to see links between residents without legal permission to remain in the UK and the cultivation of cannabis. Convictions suggest that individuals continue to be smuggled into the UK and employed as gardeners for large cannabis grows. Smuggling and trafficking are differentiated from each other by the following definitions:

- Smuggling is characterised by illegal entry only and international movement only, either secretly or by deception (whether for profit or otherwise). There is normally little coercion/violence involved or required from those assisting in the smuggling.
- Trafficking involves the transportation of persons into the UK in order to exploit them by the use of force, violence, deception, intimidation, coercion or abuse of their vulnerability⁹.

Modern Slavery

Victims continue to be exploited for the purpose of criminal activity. End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT UK), the global network dedicated to protecting children from all forms of exploitation and trafficking, continues to raise concerns about the criminalisation of children apprehended in raids on cannabis factories. Individuals, including children, have indeed been prosecuted as opposed to being safeguarded as vulnerable victims. There are clear examples of children being re-trafficked after coming into contact with law enforcement, with many going missing from local authority care.¹⁰

Forces have also used publicity campaigns and advertising in line with national guidance around human trafficking. Much work has been done internally around educating officers and staff from the police and other emergency services and partner agencies to spot the signs of trafficking and treating victims appropriately. Campaign work and training to raise awareness with charities, partner agencies and the public is also ongoing providing information about who to call and support services available.

Police officers dealing with such cases must also work to the guidelines of National Referral Mechanism, introduced by the Government to provide support to victims of modern slavery which is available through the NCA UK Human Trafficking Centre.

The Modern Slavery Act 2015 aims to improve identification of victims linked to the cultivation of cannabis. In the UK Mr Kevin Hyland OBE has been appointed the independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, a role created to encourage good practice.

Violence

There have been examples of violent burglaries linked to cannabis grows as a result of more factories being based in suburban homes. Police data indicates this is increasing.

Bypassing Utility Services

Properties often suffer extensive damage when rented to cannabis cultivators. Furthermore, to avoid arousing the suspicion of energy companies, farmers and growers bypass the electricity meters of properties and go straight into the main grid. This runs unregulated electricity through the property, often using precarious wiring which creates an increased risk of fire

⁹ [www.cps.gov.uk/legal/h to k/human trafficking and smuggling/](http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/h%20to%20k/human_trafficking_and_smuggling/) (Last viewed 23rd October 2014)

¹⁰ ECPAT UK Understanding... Child Trafficking 2011

Emerging Trends

Threats and risks of multi-commodity and poly -dealers

Multi-commodity suppliers are becoming more common particularly in the recreational market where smaller dealers supply a range of drugs. Examples include an increase in poly-dealers particularly with skunk cannabis and heroin being dealt by the same individual. This poses considerable risks to cannabis users being persuaded to use other more harmful drugs.

Traps

During this reporting period, there have been minimal reports of traps reported at cultivation sites from police forces. Reports in the media show a male was jailed for two years in May 2014 after it was discovered he had converted his garage and sheds into a cannabis factory. The individual had set up explosives including shotgun shells to guard his 'stash' as well as other improvised traps to deter intruders. In September 2013 a male was arrested following the discovery of more than 500 plants being grown in a trading estate in a disguised property, using the façade of a respectable-looking tyre company. Behind a fake wall police discovered a cannabis factory the size of a tennis court, guarded by two traps made up of shotguns loaded with blanks designed to fire when a tripwire was activated. With OCGs 'taxing' or 'ripping off' other cultivation sites, it is likely therefore that the emergence of more sophisticated security of sites and use of traps will increase as OCGs attempt to protect their yield.

Control via Social Media

Increasingly police forces are using open source research to identify trends in the cultivation of commercial cannabis, with forces establishing dedicated cybercrime units and increasing the number of staff trained in open source research. Police forces routinely use social media to publicise activity, share prevention advice and request information from the public.

Conclusion

A lot of work is currently being undertaken by police forces across the country to tackle the cultivation of cannabis. This report highlights the need for continued working with other agencies in order to maximise the impact. Identifying the number of factories in operation and bringing to justice those higher up in the criminal organisational chain whilst also helping to protect vulnerable people forced to work in this illegal trade is key.

The exploitation of vulnerable people, violence, modern slavery and the operation of OCGs all feature in this profile and are prominent in forces' police and crime plans.

Through tackling commercial cannabis cultivation, law enforcement agencies are able to respond to these key priorities.