

Weeding out the dope

It's five years since *Druglink* last covered the phenomenon of cannabis farms, during which time the national picture has changed considerably and in the process put police resources under considerable strain. By **Harry Shapiro**

On December 20th 2011 Trevor Bradley was jailed for five and a half years for conspiring to produce and supply cannabis. He was part of a five strong gang that ran a number of cannabis farms from premises in the Greater Manchester area. In 1997, Bradley had been jailed for fourteen years for supplying ecstasy across Merseyside. Trevor Bradley is the father of Kirk Bradley, who, at the time of his father's sentencing, was on the run from a firearms charge. Kirk was the leading member of a gang who acted as 'enforcers' for other gangs in the Merseyside area, He was subsequently caught in Amsterdam and convicted in his absence in March this year.

The involvement of domestic criminal gangs is just one aspect of the changing face of commercial cannabis growing in the UK, but one of the most significant because it indicates that commercial growing has become embedded in the UK, part of mainstream criminal activity which will not be easy to dislodge. Never before has the UK had inland drug production on this scale and it presents a huge challenge to the enforcement agencies both in terms of strategic response, time and money.

There has always been a level of home grown cannabis cultivation in the UK, but primarily restricted to personal use or social supply including those growing cannabis for medicinal purposes both for themselves and for a small circle of fellow sufferers.



It was in 2000-01 that cannabis cultivation became more commercially organised and widespread following a wave of largely illegal immigration from North Vietnam to augment the legitimate community who had been

settling here since the mid 1970s. This new group sought to replicate the highly lucrative cannabis trade their Canadian counterparts had built up in British Columbia. This they did, quietly at the margins of criminality, keeping the whole enterprise within family groups or using other illegal immigrants to tend the farms in order to pay off debts of £15-20,000 paid to those who had secured their entry into the UK.

It wasn't until the police launched a nationwide crack down on cannabis farms called Operation Keymer in 2006 that some hint of the extent of the trade became apparent. The public were introduced to the idea of ordinary suburban houses being gutted and transformed into cannabis farms, where thousands of pounds worth of cannabis was being grown under powerful lighting using electricity stolen through a Heath Robinson tangle of wiring and junction boxes. Landlords and letting agents were warned about well-spoken Vietnamese businessmen looking to rent houses; utility companies about looking out for unusual spikes in energy consumption from residences; and neighbours, postmen and the like, about houses suddenly being blacked-out, strange comings and goings – and weird smells. Cannabis farms were turning up in sheds, lock-ups, greenhouses and on more industrial sites. The police could hardly keep pace with the number of premises exposed as cannabis farms; as with most sorts of crime, the more

they looked, the more they found. The number of farms discovered has soared since 2007/8 from 3000 to 7800 in 2010/11. And while Vietnamese (and to a lesser extent Chinese) gangs are still in the driving seat of production, they are by no means the only game in town. The Trevor Kirby gang is just one example of how cannabis production has moved from a niche criminal activity to just another arm of a generalised British criminal portfolio. It would appear that domestic criminals are moving into the cultivation business as a way of maximising profits from the trade, because they have always been key players in the distribution chain: the Vietnamese tend to stick to what they know. A sign of possible closer ties between cross-cultural gangs was presented at a recent Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) conference on cannabis cultivation held in Newcastle. One constabulary reported that there was a time when cannabis farms would be booby-trapped for fear that local gangsters would break in and steal the plants. But no traps had been found for nearly two years, suggesting in that area at least, different criminal groups had come to an understanding.

After a move to larger, more industrial growing spaces, Acpo report that the gangs are now favouring a move back towards residential properties to spread the risk across an area, an indication that police are having an impact. One officer from Scotland told *Druglink* that Vietnamese activity in his area was in decline as they have an aversion to being arrested and possibly deported. Some growers go to extraordinary lengths to conceal their activities. *Druglink* heard of one case where four shipping containers (anything up to forty feet long and ten feet high) were entirely buried underground, accessed only by a trapdoor in a caravan located in the middle of a field.

But having established that there is a substantial drug trade worth millions of pounds annually, the police are faced with the problem of what to do about it other than what is known as 'tip and skip'. This is essentially visible policing on the ground; a farm is located and the police go in, seize the plants and then strip out all the equipment and throw it in a skip. They may find a Vietnamese or Chinese gardener on the premises, but more likely police will bust into an empty house, although on one occasion, when police went back several hours later to a farm to strip it out, they found

a gardener still hiding in a tiny cupboard. Often there is no attempt to try and link a single location with others in the area or perhaps immediately outside the local Basic Command Unit (BCU) and here is where structural problems in policing emerge.

...CANNABIS PRODUCTION HAS MOVED FROM A NICHE CRIMINAL ACTIVITY TO JUST ANOTHER ARM OF A GENERALISED BRITISH CRIMINAL PORTFOLIO'

The operational template is known as the National Intelligence Model (NIM) which divides operations up into three levels; in this case level 1 would be a typical local 'tip and skip' operation; level 2 would be an operation involving officers across the Force area while level 3 operates at national and international level. But argues, criminologist Daniel Silverstone in his 2010 article in *Policing*, when you are dealing with Vietnamese gangs, this model 'runs into reoccurring problems because [they] tend to operate at all three levels simultaneously. For example, the 'cannabis factories' appear at level 1, but they might be situated in various BCUs and they are managed by personnel who move themselves and the crop swiftly across forces as the market and evasion from local law enforcement dictates'. Silverstone goes on to point out that level three comes into play too, because proceeds are repatriated to Vietnam and the gardeners are trafficked in from overseas.

An example of what can be achieved using intelligence to transcend the potential limitations of the NIM was presented at the Newcastle conference by Cheshire Constabulary. Fans of *The Wire* will recall the episodes where Lester Freamon was able to provide proof of conspiracy by tracking mobile phone calls. This is precisely what the Cheshire police in 'Operation Penne' set out to do. They linked suspected growers with letting agents, in locations across the country. After several months work, the arrests were made and key players successfully prosecuted.

And overall at a national level, the value of this kind of work is

acknowledged. In the wake of the decision to reclassify cannabis back to Class B, 2008 proved something of watershed for the strategic oversight of cannabis cultivation. Acpo publicly stated that in general 'there is now a continuum of harm caused by serious organised criminality that runs from our neighbourhoods to the national and international levels. This requires a continuum of effective policing response'. The National Policing Improvement Agency published an operational handbook on dealing with cannabis farms while Acpo appointed an officer to lead on this and established a Commercial Cannabis Cultivation Working Group(CCCWG).

However, it is precisely strategic intelligence-led policing that is suffering because of the 20% cut imposed on the police across the board – and the evidence suggests that drug enforcement will take one of the biggest hits. In its 2012 'Problem Profile' for cannabis cultivation, Acpo revealed that only City of London police failed to find a cannabis farm on its patch out of 49 UK forces while the estimated street value of the cannabis seized was in excess of £200m. Yet Acpo also reported that 'tackling offenders for commercial cannabis cultivation is not considered a priority by most UK Police Forces, due to competing demands with more importance given to the supply of Class A drugs. The dismantling of cannabis factories is still primarily seen as a short term solution, with missed opportunities for further investigation into potentially linked factories'.

This underlines the problem identified by the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC) in their 2011 report, *Drug enforcement an age of austerity*. UKDPC reported that drug related policing expenditure and activity was expected to decrease at a faster rate than other activities – and in particular longer-term proactive intelligence work like that carried out by Chester Constabulary would fare the worst. In fact 15% of the respondents noted they had little if any funding allocated to drug activities at all.

The police face a double whammy – a trade whose roots run deeper and wider than ever before (where the internet has made the purchase of seeds and equipment easy for amateurs and professionals alike) and, despite more strategic oversight of the problem, dwindling financial resources to weed out the dope.