

12 Coming out of the closet

Risk management strategies of illegal cannabis growers

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Introduction

The emergence and expansion of indoor cannabis cultivation has been one of the most significant changes to drug markets of recent decades (Decorte et al., 2011). Mirroring a trend reported in many industrialised countries, domestic production has replaced smuggling as the major source of cannabis in the UK. This process of import substitution has been accompanied by a democratisation of the cannabis market (Potter, 2010; Ancrum and Treadwell, 2017).

In media coverage and policy responses, the shift towards domestic production has been portrayed as harmful to society at large. Cannabis growers are seen primarily as profit-driven drug dealers involved in violence and other serious crime. Grow sites – often called cannabis factories or cannabis farms to emphasise both the technological sophistication and commercial intent of domestic cultivation – are linked to fires and flooding, electricity theft,¹ modern-day slavery and various other harms and nuisances. The product itself is considered dangerous – stronger than imported cannabis, linked to mental health problems and addiction and containing harmful chemicals used to maximise yield. In the public narrative, ‘skunk’ (the term used generically to refer to premium cannabis varieties grown in optimal conditions) is different to the imported cannabis of yesteryear: more dangerous and hence even more worthy of strict prohibitionist responses (Stevens, 2007).

Some of this narrative is legitimate. Links between serious crime and the upper levels of drug markets remain even as large-scale growing replaces importation at the top of the distribution pyramid. High demand and the risk premium associated with illegal commodities make for a lucrative market attractive to professional criminals. There is violence and people-trafficking. Petty crime and nuisance do blight neighbourhoods. Fires and floods occur. The potency and purity of domestically grown cannabis can make for a qualitatively different drug with implications for the health and well-being of consumers (Potter and Chatwin, 2012).

However, while large-scale cultivation may account for a significant share of the market, most cases of cannabis growing do not fit these media stereotypes or policy assumptions. Most growers operate on a small scale, in their own homes. Some of these still seek to make money but they are rarely involved in more serious criminality. Others supply cannabis only to friends on a not-for-profit basis

or grow primarily or exclusively for themselves. Increasing numbers are involved in growing cannabis for medical rather than recreational use (Hakkarainen et al., 2015). Many growers, whether growing for medical or recreational consumption, regulate the potency of the cannabis they produce, are proud of the quality and purity of their product and escalate their criminal involvement from possession to cultivation precisely because they do not want to be supporting the ‘real’ criminals involved in drug dealing (Potter, 2010; Potter et al., 2015).

Regardless of reasons for growing or scale of operation, cannabis cultivation is illegal and growers risk prosecution. Alongside the threat of arrest is the risk of (other) criminals targeting the grower with theft, violence or coercion. For these reasons, cannabis growers seek to remain undetected by the police or those who may report their crimes. This includes hiding activities from family, friends and neighbours to protect both them and the grower from potentially dangerous ‘guilty knowledge’. For a significant subset of growers, there is a secondary challenge – to dispel the stereotypes that they are bad people and that their activities are harmful to society.

This chapter explores the ways in which growers manage the risk of detection against the background discourse of cannabis growing as a harmful activity. Growers take practical steps to reduce the chance of being discovered and manage social relationships to reduce the likelihood that their activities are reported by people who do know about them. Many also engage in forms of activism aimed at changing the way their activities are perceived by society, promoting home-grown cannabis as undermining the ‘real criminals’ who profit from prohibition and reducing the harms associated with the illegal cannabis market.

Cannabis cultivation in the UK

Historically, nearly all the cannabis consumed in the UK has been imported. Most cannabis resin, and a minority of herbal cannabis, continues to originate overseas. Some home-growing of cannabis has likely occurred in the UK for as long as cannabis has been used in this country but the trend towards domestic production utilising more technically advanced methods began in earnest in the 1990s and accelerated in the early 2000s (Potter, 2010). In 1997, Independent Drug Monitoring Unit (IDMU) data showed ‘a substantial increase in consumption of domestically-produced cannabis . . . at the expense of imported herbal cannabis [compared to 1994]’ but noted that ‘resin remains the most common form of the drug’ (Atha et al., 1999, p. 2). They estimated that around 30 per cent of cannabis consumed in the UK in 1997 was grown here (p. 16). By 2012 this figure was over 80 per cent (Atha, 2012).

Official data show similar trends. From 1994 to 2000, resin made up around 70 per cent of all cannabis seized in England and Wales (Mwenda et al., 2005). By 2016–2017, herbal cannabis featured in 88 per cent of all cannabis-related drug seizures (Hargreaves and Smith, 2015). The number of seizures involving cannabis plants increased from under 2,000 in 2001 (Mulchandani et al., 2010) to 16,590 in 2011/2012 (ONS, 2018). The total number of cannabis plants seized

peaked at over 750,000 in 2009/2010, more than double what it was three years previously (ONS, 2018). While both the number of seizures involving plants and the number of plants seized have declined since, they remain significantly higher than they were at the turn of the century. (The recent reduction likely reflects policing priorities rather than a decline in domestic cultivation; the decline in seizures cuts across all types of cannabis, not just plants.)

The explosion in domestic cannabis cultivation has been fuelled by advances in horticultural science and easy access to information and expertise via the Internet (Bouchard et al., 2011; Potter, 2010). Selective breeding to produce varieties with particularly desirable characteristics has been established for a while, but the spread of the use of indoor growing technology since the 1990s is noteworthy. In 1997, the IDMU reported that 43 per cent of growers in their survey were using 'pedigree' seeds while 70 per cent were only using natural light. Two decades later, 89.7 per cent of UK respondents in an international survey reported using artificial lights (Lenton et al., 2018).

These technologically advanced aspects of cannabis cultivation have contributed to the portrayal of skunk as dangerous. Of key concern is the relationship (often exaggerated in the media) between high-potency cannabis and mental health problems, including psychosis and schizophrenia (ACMD, 2008). Domestically cultivated cannabis has been specifically linked to an increased risk of such conditions (Di Forti et al., 2009) and a reported increase in cannabis addiction (Hall, 2009). Premium cannabis varieties grown in optimal conditions have significantly higher levels of THC and lower levels of CBD than 'traditional' herbal cannabis or cannabis resin (Potter et al., 2017). THC is the main active ingredient in cannabis. CBD, on the other hand, has anti-psychotic properties, offsetting some of the psychoactive effects of THC (Englund et al., 2014; Fakhoury, 2016). High levels of THC, and a higher ratio of THC to CBD, are potentially more harmful to consumers than lower potency strains produced under natural conditions (Morgan and Curran, 2008). It is concerns about the strength of home-grown cannabis and its potential effects on the mental health of users that underpin a decade of newspaper headlines from 'Deadly Skunk Floods City' (Bentham, 2007) to 'Children Aged Nine Damaged By Cannabis' (Borland, 2019).

Further health risks relate to the use of additives (fertilisers, pesticides and plant growth regulators, etc.) to improve yield. In the UK, 61 per cent of cannabis growers reported using chemicals of some kind in the growing process. Some commonly used additives are carcinogenic or have been linked to other health risks. Lack of regulation means that growers are poorly informed about exactly what they are adding to their plants and the effects these chemicals may have on cannabis consumers (Lenton et al., 2018). There are also reports of commercial growers adulterating harvested cannabis with substances including hairspray and glass beads to make it appear of a higher quality or weight (Knodt, 2017; Randerson, 2007; Pawlik and Mahler, 2011). Given the number of people using cannabis and the dominance of domestic cultivation, unregulated additives and adulterants are a potentially serious public health concern (Lenton et al., 2018).

Indoor cultivation methods are also associated with various environmental risks. Automated irrigation systems can cause flooding, and fires can result from the heat generated by grow-lights or from poorly wired electrical equipment or attempts to bypass electricity meters (Potter, 2011). UK local news media regularly report on cannabis farms discovered by emergency services responding to domestic floods or fires – often emphasising the danger to life and damage to neighbouring property. Meanwhile, up to £70 million of electricity is stolen each year to power cannabis farms (OFGEM, 2014).

Police concerns focus not just on cultivation as a criminal offence² but also on the links between ‘commercial cultivation’ (defined here as growing 25 or more plants or having a ‘farm’-type set-up, in turn defined by technological sophistication or evidence of ongoing cultivation) and organised crime, violence (including murder; e.g. Surrey Live, 2009) and the supply of other drugs (NPCC, 2014). A serious concern is with victims of people trafficking – often children – being forced to work in cannabis farms³ (Anti-Slavery International, 2014). The link with other types of crime is also recognised:

The threat from the domestic commercial cultivation of cannabis in the UK is increasing. There has been an increase in robberies, burglaries and violence (including the use of firearms) linked to cannabis farms. There is an increase in small-scale grow sites. . . . There is evidence of ‘taxing’ (stealing) of crops and debt bondage being used to control local individuals.

(ACPO, 2012)

Much of the cannabis grown in the UK is undoubtedly done so by ‘professional’ criminals. The police (ACPO, 2009), NGOs (Anti-Slavery International, 2014) and academic researchers (Savage and Silverstone, 2010) have all emphasised the involvement of Vietnamese OCGs. However, while such groups play a significant role, they do not dominate. The National Police Chiefs’ Council (NPCC) report ‘a decline in activity among South East Asian offenders and OCGs’ with ‘a new trend of cultivation sites being controlled by white British OCGs, which employ Vietnamese nationals who are forced to work in cultivation’ (NPCC, 2014, p. 4). A rise in Albanian OCG involvement in commercial cannabis cultivation has also been observed (Anti-Slavery International, 2014).

Kirby and Peale describe a shift ‘away from large-scale commercial cultivation, at times coordinated by Southeast Asian organized crime groups, to increased cultivation within residential premises by British citizens’ (Kirby and Peale, 2015, p. 279). Police data show that white British men aged 25–34 are most commonly involved in commercial cultivation (NPCC, 2014). Ancrum and Treadwell (2017) highlight ‘the usual suspects; enterprising, working class males’, home-grown criminals motivated by money and willing to engage in whatever ‘limited illicit opportunities around them’. Potter (2010, 2011) identifies different organisational approaches to profit-oriented growing including individual operations, partnerships, ‘co-operative’ and ‘franchising’ arrangements alongside ‘corporate’ criminal organisations. Potter’s growers were also predominantly younger white men

but people from different socio-economic backgrounds – and with differing levels of involvement in other crime – were found across all types.

Many growers are neither involved in other types of crime nor seeking to profit from growing cannabis (Potter et al., 2015). An early UK study identified those who grow only for their own use, those who engage in ‘social supply’ (i.e. providing cannabis for friends on a not-for-profit basis; see e.g. Potter, 2009) and ‘social/commercial growers’ (supplying their social networks ‘at least in part to supplement their income’) as well as ‘commercial growers’ (defined here as ‘growing to make money, and selling to any potential customer’) (Hough et al., 2003). Potter (2010) identifies similar categories of sole-use, non-profit and social-supply growers, emphasising the absence of any profit motivation for large numbers of cannabis growers. However, he also describes how some examples of these types progress to commercially oriented cultivation as they recognise – and embrace – the opportunity to make profit.

Both Hough et al. (2003) and Potter (2010) also include medical growers in their typologies – ‘motivated mainly by the perceived therapeutic values of cannabis’ (Hough et al., 2003, p. ix) and growing to supply themselves or others to treat medical conditions. It has been estimated that up to a million people in the UK could be using cannabis, illegally, for medical purposes (APPG, 2016). Regardless of whether cannabis does provide objective medical benefits in any given case, many thousands of users do believe that cannabis is an effective medicine for a range of different conditions (Hakkarainen et al., 2015). Although some growers may use medical necessity as a justification for what is essentially recreational cannabis use, research shows genuine differences in the profiles of growers who claim medical reasons compared to growers who do not (Hakkarainen et al., 2019). This sub-population of cannabis growers seems to have grown rapidly – or at least become more visible – in recent years, seemingly encouraged by the expanding scientific evidence for the efficacy of medical cannabis and the legalisation of medical cannabis in a number of countries around the world (Klein and Potter, 2018). Growing for medical use is not a legal defence in the UK – the crimes of cultivation, supply and possession remain the same (except in the very few cases where these activities have been licensed by the government). For most medical growers, criminal participation is motivated by desperation or altruism rather than financial reward.

Medical use is not the only motivation behind non-commercial cultivation. An online survey of smaller-scale growers found that 53 per cent of UK respondents reported growing ‘to provide myself with cannabis for medical reasons’ and 18 per cent reported growing ‘to provide others with cannabis for medical reasons’. Other widely cited motives for home-growing relate to avoiding the harms associated with buying cannabis: many home-growers want to avoid both the super-strength, psychosis-inducing, chemically adulterated skunk *and* the criminal dealers that the media reports as dominating the illicit market. Intangible benefits also play a part with growers citing motives like ‘pleasure’ and ‘because the plant is beautiful’, but the two most important motivations were to provide ‘cannabis for personal use’ (93 per cent) and because growing is ‘cheaper than buying

cannabis' (84 per cent). Only 9 per cent indicated 'so I can sell it' as a motivation for growing (Potter et al., 2015).

It is impossible to know what proportion of growers are driven by different degrees of profit or are involved in other types of crime. While smaller-scale operations can still generate sizeable incomes (Potter, 2010) and larger operations do not necessarily imply other criminal involvement, both academic and police sources suggest the link to serious and organised crime is greater for larger-scale operations aimed at generating higher levels of profit. Applying the 80/20 rule (the 'Pareto principle') suggests that larger-scale commercial growers likely dominate the market in terms of total amount of cannabis produced but that smaller-scale growers exist in much larger numbers. This assumption gains some support from police data showing that 60 per cent of seizures of cannabis plants involved 10 plants or fewer (with 18 per cent involving a single plant) (ONS, 2018).

Some of these smaller growers do make money or are involved in other crime, but there is a clear discrepancy between the image conjured by the idea of commercial, criminal supply and the banal reality of home-based, small-scale production. However, regardless of motivation, scale of operation or other criminal involvement, all cannabis growers are engaged in an activity deemed a serious criminal offence under the law and portrayed in a predominantly negative light by the media. The offence of cultivation carries heavy penalties and although there is a presumption against imprisonment for small-scale, first-time offenders, lengthy sentences can follow where there is evidence of commercial intent or criminal organisation (Sentencing Council, 2012). In the public eye, the associations of skunk as a powerful drug, indoor cultivation as a dangerous activity and cannabis growers as serious criminals increase the stigma associated with growing – and the likelihood of witnesses informing the police. As became apparent during our research, growers also face the threat of victimisation from (other) criminals emboldened by the knowledge that growers – themselves criminals – may be unlikely to go to the police. Yet despite potentially severe sanctions, negative public perceptions and the threat of criminal victimisation, growing persists on a huge scale in the UK.

In the remainder of this chapter, we present data from interviews with cannabis growers in the UK. We describe the strategies used to stay under the radar of law enforcement and criminal groups, of managing social relationships and of countering the negative associations of cannabis growing encountered in the press – thus resisting the framing of themselves and their 'spaces' as 'dangerous'.

Methods

In order to get a better understanding of the diverse practices and cultures associated with cannabis cultivation in the UK, we conducted research with 48 active cannabis growers. We drew on participatory and action research traditions to help overcome the difficulties researching 'active offenders' who may otherwise be reluctant to discuss their illegal activities. We utilised an inductive, ethnographic approach with observations of real-life situations accompanying in-depth

qualitative interviews. We worked from a loose interview schedule that ensured we covered certain core topics but allowed conversation to flow unhindered. By employing a qualitative, inductive research framework, we could follow the data as it emerged from the fieldwork and observe the phenomenon take shape.

In the actual research process, from the theoretical frame-setting through informant recruitment to the face-to-face interviewing, researcher and informant are building social capital that serves the interests of all parties and spans several registers. The recording of responses and observations are instrumental for data gathering but also for enacting the researcher's role and consolidating their scientific detachment. At the same time, the empathetic understanding for the informant's position creates a shared understanding of the individual situation and the broader social and political context. In this project, the researchers agreed with their informants that cannabis prohibition was a political fallacy and that it was the law that was wrong, not the grower.

This shared outlook was a prerequisite for establishing trust and getting access to informants. It also provided a situational presence from which conversation could flow back and forth. Informants were given time to expand on issues and to critically reflect on their own actions. With interviews lasting up to three hours, there was ample scope for elaboration, in-depth analysis and sometimes critical appraisal. For some informants the disclosure of sensitive information to a stranger can have a quasi-therapeutic quality. Without training or mandate to expand on this, the researchers did appreciate that their very interest and empathy helped informants to present the normalcy of their actions. Both the research process itself and the subsequent communication through publications and conference presentations are important for de-stigmatising cannabis cultivation and for constructing the cannabis grower as having a moral personhood despite the illegality of this practice.

Our research has then an 'action' dimension in so far as pressing home the case for lifting criminal sanctions and normalising domestic cannabis cultivation. On the one hand, we are hoping to humanise the growers themselves and demonstrate the roles played by opportunity and need. On the other hand, we also seek to expose some of the damage that is inflicted by prohibitionist cannabis policies and that apologists, including government spokespersons, tend to deny, ignore or trivialise.

Findings

With our recruitment process and the extra risk of serious penalties associated with their activities, we never expected to get many respondents who operated as part of OCGs, those involved in high levels of (other) serious crime or those involved in the most profitable levels of commercial cultivation. However, these types were not our target – such growers are the most associated with the cultivation-related harms portrayed in the media and underpinning policy and the most likely to be seen (by themselves and others) as rightful targets of the criminal justice system. Nevertheless, our sample covered a broad spectrum of growers including those

growing for personal use, social supply and varying degrees of commercial intent. Many respondents did not fit neatly into any one category or had occupied different roles at different times (cf. Potter, 2010).

Twenty-two of our respondents admitted growing for commercial reasons at some point in their careers, with 12 describing experiences that suggested they had been involved with gangs or OCGs. Twenty-four respondents were mostly restricted to personal and social or social/commercial cultivation (cf. Hough et al., 2003) throughout their growing careers (few growers resist the urge to occasionally share their produce with friends – and most are happy to accept money or something else in return when recipients insist).

Maria and her husband grow primarily to provide cannabis for their own use. She uses cannabis to manage her ‘complex post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and . . . psychosis’ and he smokes to help with his depression. ‘We need it to balance out those symptoms’ she says, while also admitting to enjoying the non-medical benefits. Consuming over an ounce (28g) of cannabis a week between them, ‘we were spending 140 quid a week on weed. . . . We wanted to be self-sufficient but for medical reasons as well as recreational’. Personal supply is their main motivation but if they have cannabis to spare after meeting their own requirements then ‘I have a couple of people who you know, they’ll come round. . . . I’ve got somebody who cuts my hair and they get three grams for cutting my hair, sort of got a barter system. If mates want an ounce it’s 140 quid’.

Most of our respondents were primarily producing cannabis for recreational use but 21 were growing at least partly for medical purposes. The difference between medical and recreational use is not always clear-cut (Hakkarainen et al., 2019) – Maria used the term ‘mcreational’ to describe her and her husband’s cultivation. We identified 16 respondents as having a primarily or exclusively medical narrative when we interviewed them (although some had been involved in cultivation for recreational use at earlier points in time), discussed in depth elsewhere (Klein and Potter, 2018).

Five of our respondents had previous involvement in commercial cultivation but were growing primarily for medical purposes when we interviewed them. Colin, for example, has over 20 years’ experience of growing cannabis, was ‘involved in crime related circles in [his] earlier days, but no more’ and now grows only for medicinal use. Lee also had previous involvement in ‘organised crime and the criminal milieu’ but now grows cannabis for his sick wife and ‘for reconstructing [his] spoiled self’. Dale, on the other hand, started growing to provide cannabis for his sick friend but reports that cultivation is now his main source of income.

Respondents included professionals, manual workers and the unemployed as well as students, retirees and those unable to work for health reasons. Ages ranged from those in their early 20s to senior citizens. The sample included 13 women, 8 of whom fitted a predominantly medical narrative and only one of whom was growing commercially (although three others reported previous involvement in or

links to commercial cultivation). Our respondents were exclusively white British (with one Portuguese/British dual-national). Discussion of the reasons for and implications of the absence of BME representatives in our sample are beyond the scope of this chapter, but we acknowledge the limitations on generalising our findings beyond white British growers.

Most of our respondents grew indoors using a range of specialist equipment, although some preferred to grow in their gardens or greenhouses. Regardless of scale or technical set-up, all our growers were knowledgeable about the cannabis plant itself, the varieties they grew, their preferred growing conditions and how to harvest and prepare their crops. Many, particularly the medical growers, also demonstrated knowledge and expertise in more advanced processing of their produce – including the manufacture of more concentrated preparations of cannabis (e.g. resins, ‘pollen’ and ‘shatter’), extracts and tinctures tailored to treating specific medical conditions and cannabis-based food and drink (cf. Klein and Potter, 2018).

Identifying threats

All our participants were aware of the threat of arrest and prosecution stemming from their involvement in growing. Cultivation even of a small number of plants for personal use carries heavier penalties under UK law than simple possession of cannabis. Growing on a larger scale or to supply other people is more serious again with an increased likelihood of a custodial sentence (Sentencing Council, 2012). Even those growing primarily for personal use often grew enough plants or employed cultivation methods to be considered ‘commercial’ under law enforcement definitions such as that set out by the NPCC (2014). Those involved in social or medical supply were generally aware that supply is a more serious offence and carries more severe penalties than possession regardless of motivation or whether the supplier receives financial gain. This extra risk is no deterrent to those who see their criminality as justified. As Emma, who supplies other medical users with a range of oils, capsules and other preparations she makes, says: ‘Yes, I’m going to be bang to rights for supplying. I’m going to be done in every aspect. It scares me, of course’.

There is an irony here for those who cite avoiding contact with drug dealers or contributing to the criminal economy as reasons for their growing – they commit more serious crimes themselves in order to avoid supporting ‘real’ criminals. This situation is particularly poignant for those growing for medical purposes – caught between the debilitation of their health problems, an illicit drug market run by criminals and a legal environment that criminalises their own efforts to produce an effective medicine for themselves or others (Klein and Potter, 2018). However, those involved in overt commercial cultivation accepted that they were committing a more serious criminal offence, although many still took pains to point out how their own involvement in growing was substantively different from that of the stereotypical, organised-crime type growers.

Roger runs a sophisticated operation with two friends. Although they see themselves as connoisseurs and like to experiment with growing different

varieties of cannabis to ‘keep things interesting’ profit is the central motivation and their set-up would fit most definitions of organised crime. Nevertheless, Roger and his mates see themselves as different from the ‘real criminals’ they see as dominating the UK cannabis market. ‘Yes, I know there’s a criminal element that comes with cannabis. There’s money involved and of course, yes, they’re going to be like that, but that’s where I’d rather be involved with other people and seeing my kind of people where we’re looking out for each other. We’re just trying to be healthy and happy rather than being greedy and buying a new BMW or something.’

The risk of arrest and prosecution is real. Thirteen of our subjects discussed being arrested for cultivation-related activities, with three serving prison time (two of whom were commercial growers), two receiving suspended sentences (one commercial and one medical grower) and one more awaiting trial at time of interview (medical and commercial). But while the police are an obvious threat, they are neither the only nor the most serious risk to the illicit cannabis grower. For most growers, other criminals were feared more than the police. Almost everybody we spoke to had heard stories of growers falling victim to theft, violence or extortion as local gangs sought to take advantage of the fact that growers are themselves committing criminal offences and are therefore less likely to report their own victimisation to the police. Six of our respondents had personal experience of such crimes, with a similar number having first-hand knowledge of other growers’ victimisation – including three cases where (female) partners of (male) growers had also been recipients of violence or threats of violence, one while heavily pregnant. Two of the victims we spoke to did go to the police – and both were prosecuted for cultivation because of this. The risks attached to contacting the police in cases where the growers have been the victims of crime are discussed further in the following section.

Managing risk

Like the police, criminals can only target growers when they know about their activities. For most growers, therefore, the primary defence against either law enforcement or other criminals is minimising the chance of their activities being discovered. While growing usually takes place indoors with the plants and equipment hidden from sight, there are many aspects of cultivation that leave the grower vulnerable to detection. Growing takes place over an extended period (many weeks or months for a single crop, with most indoor growers tending to grow continuously or in recurring cycles) significantly increasing the opportunity for the crime to be detected compared to time-limited offences like thefts or violence – or individual acts of drug dealing. High-intensity grow-lamps can shine brightly through windows – with blacked-out windows also potentially arousing suspicion. Grow-lights in enclosed spaces also generate heat, with growers aware that the police have access to infrared cameras mounted on helicopters. Water pumps and fans can be noisy. High levels of electricity or water consumption at

residential properties can lead to investigation by utility companies and referral to the police. Waste material from growing and suspicious activities such as night-time comings and goings (e.g. when passing cannabis on to customers or disposing of residual plant material after harvest) can be noted by neighbours and reported.

Growers employ various techniques to reduce the chance of detection. Carbon filters are used to minimise smell emanation and fans to control heat. Growers use cupboards and curtains to keep plants and lights out of sight – and some construct secret rooms in basements or roof spaces. Many of these techniques have been reported before (Potter, 2010, 2011) but we came across some new approaches. Most notably, the use of specialist ‘grow-tents’ was widespread. Legally available online or in hydroponic shops, grow-tents are designed to keep the light, heat and smell associated with cannabis cultivation under some control. On multiple occasions, we were surprised to be shown cannabis growing in tents – the familiar pungent smell of mature plants hits full-force once the tent is unzipped but had been undetectable while conducting interviews in adjacent rooms. Other approaches new to us included the use of infrared blocking plastic on windows and the selection of ‘tall plants like sweetcorn and sunflowers to hide the cannabis plants . . . tobacco plants to mask the smell’ (Jolly) by those growing outdoors.

Growers also seek to minimise the severity of sanctions if they are detected. These approaches are particularly important to those involved in commercial cultivation and include keeping equipment related to supply (e.g. scales, plastic bags or other materials used for packaging cannabis being sold to others, records of transactions) away from grow-sites and using lower-tech cultivation methods to mitigate claims of ‘farming’, professionalism or ongoing production. Another technique for commercial growers is to spread cultivation over multiple smaller sites so that if any one location gets discovered, there is less chance that the authorities will have evidence of the overall scale of operation. The spreading of cultivation over different properties – with different individuals overseeing each – also minimises the chances that a given site will be traced back to whoever is ultimately behind the growing. Again, these approaches are not new (Potter, 2010, 2011; NPCC, 2014; Kirby and Peale, 2015) but our research suggests they are more widespread than previous work has implied, and that such arrangements are not the preserve of gangs or OCGs.

Hugh is a successful English teacher who now runs his own small language school. He has been growing for many years to supplement his legitimate income but never been involved in any crime other than that related to cultivation, supply and use of cannabis (including revenue offences relating to his illegal income). He has helped ‘dozens of others’ set up their own growing operations for a share of the crop or profits in a franchising arrangement (Potter, 2010, 2011) but now finds it safer and easier, if ‘a bit less lucrative’, to operate as a ‘consultant’ – paid to advise on particular issues encountered by other growers.

Another innovation aimed at lessening the likely severity of punishment if the grower were to be caught came from another long-term commercial grower. Mark described the use of ‘sacrificial plants’, easy for the police (or criminals) to find should they raid and intended to distract them from looking for the larger-scale operation hidden behind the intricately constructed secret wall in the cellar. Having been arrested before, and previously threatened by criminal gangs, Mark argues that it is better to ‘let them find something’ if they do come to the house expecting to catch him growing. The easy-to-find plants would explain smells and other evidence of cultivation, hopefully satisfying the curiosity of the police, but should not be enough to result in a prison sentence even if the police deemed the find worthy of prosecution. ‘Sacrificial crops’ have been reported elsewhere in the context of large-scale outdoor cultivation but not previously encountered in the context of indoor production in the UK (Potter, 2011).

The risk of detection goes beyond the grow-site itself. Many growers were wary of being identified through purchasing equipment and nutrients from grow shops. Some expressed a preference for using cash rather than credit cards (although as Maria said, ‘it must have looked very dodgy, us bringing 1200 quid into a grow shop in cash’) and about avoiding discussing cannabis explicitly in conversations with shop staff (cf. Potter, 2011). Another concern expressed was with criminals monitoring grow shop customers and tracking them back to their premises. (Maria again: ‘You watch out to make sure you’re not being followed out the carpark by cars because that’s actually one of the biggest indicators that somebody will use that you’re growing and I have heard of trackers being put on cars’.)

Growers also seek to control who else knows about their cultivation. Neighbours, passers-by and doorstep callers can become witnesses who might report cultivation directly or become a source of gossip leading to the police, criminals or others becoming aware; the situational techniques described previously also mitigate these indirect threats. Visitors with an expectation of coming into the home (e.g. landlords, utility meter readers, carers) are more of a problem, and even friends and family need to be treated cautiously. Growers in family situations must also manage home life, hiding the grow room from young children and trying to ensure silence from older children and other family members. The problem here is not just that children may talk, increasing the chance of police action (or victimisation by criminals). Children also need to be protected. Parents do not want their children (at least when they are young) consuming their cannabis or harming themselves (or the cannabis plants) by coming into direct contact with the cultivation set-up. A further concern is that growing in the family home could lead to increased sentences or the involvement of social services (with the ultimate threat of having children taken into care) should it come to the attention of the authorities.

All this secrecy can cause problems in the personal and domestic spheres. Growers report persistent anxiety over the threats of law enforcement activity or being targeted by other criminals. This anxiety can be very intense at times and permeates into all areas of daily life. Maria tells us about when she is ‘really,

really afraid and the walls are red hot and the helicopter is flying overhead and it's 37 degrees in the bloody tent' and how

'it does affect your relationships, it affects the fact that if one of my friends really upsets me and they know what we're doing, that causes an imbalance in the friendship . . . because there's always that risk that you could fall out with somebody and they just think well you know, sod it I'll ring the police on you.'

Interpersonal relationships can be negatively affected not just when friends and family are party to guilty knowledge but also when growers find themselves keeping secrets from loved ones. Sometimes other growers come to be more trusted than family and friends. Those who have been arrested or victimised talk about the trauma, often with long-lasting effect, of those experiences.

Responses to the threat or reality of being targeted by other criminals brings the grower's precarious legal position – and self-perception – to the fore. Some respond with counter-threats or criminal activity of their own, demonstrating a degree of acceptance that they are part of the criminal community against which they also stand in opposition.

Harriet grows to supplement her income as a cleaner, selling small amounts to friends and the remainder to a dealer she has known for years – after keeping what she needs for her own use. Part of her motivation is to cover the cost of her son's university education – he has Asperger's syndrome and she wants to be able to pay for extra support for him. But she does not argue that her cultivation is a necessity in the way that medical users do, nor deny that she is a criminal 'I do make some money off it, yes I do. . . . I like doing it as well because I like thumbing my nose up at authority.' When she was threatened by local criminals she responded in kind: 'I had a visit one night from somebody who told me that I was to pay rent because he heard what I was growing and . . . if I wanted to grow in the area I had to clear it with him and I had to pay him a rent . . . And I turned around and I said I'm not paying you any fucking rent, he says well I'll come back here with the boys. I says really, come back with the boys. Grabbed my son, my son is 6ft 2, built like a brick shithouse and I called him, baseball bat, I said now do you want to start? I said in fact no fucking better sort him, I went out in the street and I smashed his car and never got him back . . . ' As a single woman, Harriet was aware of her potential vulnerability 'I thought no, I have to stop this now, I have to stop it in its tracks. So I did and I smashed. . . . as I said I went out and I smashed his headlights so he just thought I was a fucking crazy bitch and I've never had any trouble since.'

Others do go to the police, either confident in the sympathy they will receive as medical or non-commercial growers or in recognition that their own risk of

prosecution is a price worth paying to see justice against the more serious crimes they have been victims of.

Nick is a commercial grower who has grown in numerous residential properties with ‘a guy I knew who was dodgy, who had links to estate agents who would happily sign us a gaff out in a fake name, we were doing that for about a year and a half. We just rented flats in and around [city], filled them with weed. He’d paid for all the equipment, I just got to help him look after it and feed it and he knew that I knew what I was talking about and we’d just split it down the middle and we earned quite a lot of money off it.’ One evening the house he was living in was broken into and he and his girlfriend were threatened by ‘two guys in balaclavas with machetes’ who stole his current crop (‘thousands of pounds worth’) saying ‘if you call the police, we’re coming back’. Nick did call the police, explaining that ‘I’m a student that grows my own weed and I’ve just been armed robbed’ but knowing that ‘they can obviously clock I’m not just a student that grows weed’ because of the size and sophistication of his operation. He was charged with cultivation and supply: ‘the prosecution were looking for two years inside and [my barrister] managed to get me 500 hours community service and no fine because I was a student on no income’. Although Nick recognised how close he was to getting a custodial sentence he thinks that calling the police was the right thing to do. He was frustrated that ‘they were not in any way interested in catching what I called the real criminals’ and that he – and his girlfriend – were treated as serious criminals (they were arrested by armed police) despite calling the police as victims of violent crime.

James demonstrated an interesting combination of approaches. He started growing for his own medical use (for fibromyalgia and chronic pain), escalated to supplying other medical users (accepting payment from ‘those who can’, but donating cannabis to others in need) and now also sells to some non-medical users to cover some of his overheads. Discussing the threat from other criminals (he tells vivid stories of such events happening to other growers he knows), he highlights his own contacts in the local criminal underworld: ‘if you come near my crop and steal it or threaten me in any way you will find out that I’ve got some nice friends . . . including one guy that will gladly come and relieve you of any debts you owe, and he won’t knock at your front door.’ He has also contacted the local police to tell them that he grows cannabis for his own medical use and inviting them to come and discuss this with him although they have not taken him up on this invitation. This, he felt, would give him some defence against arrest in the future (‘Why now?’ he will ask, ‘you have known about this for two years’) but also make it easier to report any criminal activity targeted against him.

There were many other examples of growers seeking to reduce risk by engaging with those who might be perceived as a threat rather than relying solely on secrecy. For those involved in medical cultivation, winning over loved ones, carers and

medical practitioners was particularly important (see Klein and Potter, 2018) but non-medical growers also sought to change the views of people they come into contact with, explaining – and demonstrating – how home-growing can actually reduce the harms related to domestic cultivation as portrayed in the media. Others go further, overtly campaigning for a change in the law. For example, Brian, a social/commercial grower, tries ‘to explain . . . through these letters in the paper and that . . . about how . . . we should have this legal’.

Breaking down stereotypes and reframing the narrative

We have written elsewhere about how medical growers come to redefine themselves as victims, altruistic ‘apomedicators’⁴ and activists rather than criminals (Klein and Potter, 2018). But it is not just medical-use growers who seek to reframe the narrative around domestic cannabis cultivation.

Growers of all types also seek to dispel the ‘skunk myth’ that home-grown cannabis is particularly harmful due to its potency or the use of additives and adulterants.

‘I don’t agree with commercial gangster operations because . . . I’m a purist and the dope is actually really bad when it’s grown for money.’

(Simon)

‘It was organic . . . that’s why we ended up growing it mostly ourselves because the other growers were crap.’

(Mary)

Personal use, social supply and medical growers are particularly keen to distinguish their own activities from ‘real’ crimes by emphasising their altruistic motivations. But many overtly commercial growers also seek to distance themselves from the harm-focused stereotypes discussed earlier in the chapter.

‘I think I’m being a public servant really. . . . I think I’m giving people quality, something that they want. . . . Why buy some shit stuffed with gunk from criminals that don’t give a shit about it?’

(Mark)

There is an obvious tension here for those who are profiting from their cultivation or involved in wider criminality relating to their growing activities. But such growers often point out that it is the prohibition of cannabis that pushes them into such behaviours.

‘We’re not bloody criminals. You know, it’s prohibition that has caused the black market and has caused the Vietnamese child slaves living in basements making money for gangsters. That’s caused by prohibition, you know, and by stepping out of that model and keeping it all under your own roof, as the

cannabis club model encourages, you're taking control away from the gangsters and away from the law as well because the law is wrong.'

(Lucy)

Although less vociferous than medical growers, some commercial growers also engage in overt activism – joining cannabis social clubs (cf. Decorte and Pardal, 2017) and campaign groups, for example. Not everybody who makes money from cultivation wants cannabis legalised as they recognise that this would undermine their own profit-making enterprises. For others, however, profit (though welcome) is incidental and secondary to ideological views. For example, both Hugh and Mark have made substantial amounts of money through growing themselves and through helping other people become growers. Both recognise that setting up other growers undermines their own potential income; both argue that encouraging more people to grow their own is important as it undermines the more criminogenic aspects of the cannabis market. While happy to make money under prohibition, both are still committed to the ideological aim of legalisation. Other growers do not see legalisation and profit as incompatible, planning instead to become legitimate players in a legal cannabis economy should the opportunity arise.

Alan is in his 30s and has now served two prison sentences for cultivation and supply. Operating at a sizable scale, you might expect Alan to have avoided drawing attention to himself. However, between his prison terms, Alan ran a local cannabis club and pursued a judicial review case against the government for not considering the possibility of licensing him to grow and supply cannabis under the Misuse of Drugs Act. His campaigning received a lot of local media attention but he continued to grow cannabis on a commercial scale during this period, leading to his arrest and second prison term. His aim, throughout, was to campaign for legalisation thus legitimising his own commercial growing and he saw his willingness to break the law and pay the consequences as an important part of his political activism.

Conclusions

One of our aims in this project was to see how the domestic cannabis cultivation situation in the UK had changed since Potter's research in the early years of the new millennium (Potter, 2010). Broadly speaking, the range of people involved in cannabis cultivation, the methods they employed and their levels of involvement in cannabis dealing were similar to those found in this earlier work. The same types and subtypes of personal use, social supply and commercially oriented cultivators were still represented, driven by different combinations of ideology, altruism, medical necessity and financial incentives. More interviewees this time around reported on overlaps with serious and organised crime – whether as participants or victims – and more people discussed growing for medical purposes. Technological sophistication seemed to have increased – while some growers still resort to soil and sunlight approaches, the use of specialist equipment and

techniques to increase yield, to improve security and to process harvested cannabis was widespread. Whether these differences reflect genuine changes, our approach to sampling and recruitment or a greater willingness for growers to discuss their activities with researchers is hard to be sure. However, it is clear that cannabis cultivation in the UK is fragmented and heterogeneous, with serious criminals, opportunistic entrepreneurs, idealistic activists and hobbyists all filling their own niches.

Changes in cannabis policy around the world and the emergence of a legal cannabis industry have influenced the domestic scene. The development of growing technologies has accelerated in the context of legal markets in a number of jurisdictions (particularly in North America) and decriminalisation or tolerance of domestic cultivation in others (including many European countries). The Internet provides easy access to knowledge of growing techniques, the burgeoning scientific evidence of the efficacy of medical cannabis and the tactics and outcomes of legalisation campaigns in those countries adopting more liberal cannabis laws. Policy change elsewhere fuels legalisation arguments and inspires UK activists. Social media enables growers to communicate, exchanging tips and advice but also coordinating political campaigns.

In terms of resisting the negative stereotypes associated with domestic cannabis cultivation, these factors have manifested in two main ways. Growers across the spectrum are generally aware of both the need and the techniques available to minimise the risk of detection through primary prevention methods, with even personal-use growers using technology like grow-tents, carbon-filters and infra-red absorbing film. Many of those involved in cultivation for non-commercial reasons – and even some that are primarily motivated by profit – engage in broader efforts to change the narrative, seeking to distance themselves from the image associated with the ‘real’ criminal element and supporting changes to cannabis policy that, they argue, would reduce the skunk-related harms that are caused by prohibition rather than inherent in cannabis itself.

There has been some shift in the narrative in the UK. Self-supply⁵ and medical use (ACPO, 1999) have long been mitigating factors in sentencing and police decisions on whether to pursue prosecution. Since the 1980s, the police have had an increasing array of disposals to deal with cannabis-related crimes outside of the courts (e.g. cautioning and compounding, PNDs (Penalty Notices for Disorder), fiscal fines and cannabis warnings), although these are primarily used for possession offenses rather than cultivation or supply (Lloyd and McKeganey, 2010). The current sentencing guidelines for drug offences (Sentencing Council, 2012) formalise recognition of social and medical supply, with a presumption towards non-custodial sentences for those involved in such practices. Recent media coverage of some high-profile cases of medical cannabis users (especially the epileptic boys Alfie Dingley and Billy Caldwell; BBC, 2018a; Busby and Bowman, 2018) reflects growing public support for medical use. Changes to the UK law in this area in November 2018 may have been minimal in terms of widening legal access to medical cannabis but show some political willingness to at least consider change. Elsewhere, a number of UK police forces have effectively enacted

de facto decriminalisation policies with regard to cannabis possession, small-scale cultivation and social supply (Hitchens, 2016). Sixty-three cannabis social clubs (CSCs) registered under the umbrella group UKCSC are open about their existence and their members' involvement in cultivation, but so far none of these have been raided by the police or taken to court. Calls for more wide-reaching reform of cannabis law include many respectable supporters, with former Conservative Party leader William Hague recently becoming the latest big-name politician calling for change (Busby, 2018).

The relationship between the change in narrative and the activist tendencies of growers is a bilateral one – growers sensing a change in public mood are encouraged to be more vociferous campaigners which, in turn, provides momentum to the legalisation movement. There is clearly more support for medical than recreational users. There is also more activism among medical growers than those involved in commercial supply. But many of those involved in cultivation for non-medical reasons, including a number of growers who profit from their activities, also seek to change the narrative around domestic cultivation – emphasising how their activities are not only different from the criminals who dominate the illicit market but actually undermine those criminals by taking custom away from them. Many growers not only make but also embody the argument that cultivation is not inherently linked to the harms highlighted in the media. Examples like Colin and Lee, Mark and Alan show that even those commercial criminal growers who have been involved in serious and organised crime can come back to both support and embody this.

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Notes

- 1 Technically the crime here is abstraction of electricity under s. 13 of the Theft Act 1968.
- 2 The offence of cannabis cultivation is punishable under s. 6(2) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (MDA). However, s. 4(2) MDA creates the offence of production, which includes cultivation. The maximum penalty for both on indictment is 14 years' imprisonment. However, offences under s. 4(2) fall within the list of 'lifestyle offences' under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and this allows the sentencing court to make a confiscation order in cases where the defendant(s) has benefited from their criminal conduct (CPS, 2019).
- 3 The problem of people trafficking and exploitation of child labour is particularly, but not exclusively, associated with Vietnamese groups involved in commercial cultivation (BBC, 2018b; Gentleman, 2018; South China Morning Post, 2018).
- 4 Apomedication is a portmanteau of apomediation and medication and refers to the sharing of knowledge, beliefs and experiences relating to medical cannabis use between and among users outside of the medical establishment. See Klein and Potter (2018).
- 5 R. v Brown [1973] Crim. L.R. 62

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