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Inside one of Britain's cannabis factories

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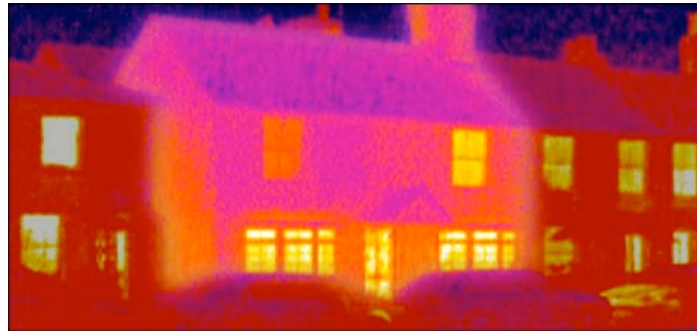
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Police are using thermal imaging cameras to search for cannabis factories

By Julian Joyce
BBC News

By toughening the law on cannabis the government hopes to drive a crackdown on UK "farms", many of which have sprung up in recent years.

In the cellar beneath Jimmy's house, cannabis seedlings flourish under bright lights. Upstairs, taking over half the attic, more mature plants flower in lamp-lit trays, amid the hum of automatic water and nutrient delivery systems.

This is "hydroponic" cannabis - grown without soil in trays. Jimmy's indoor "farm" is one of many to have sprung up behind the walls and closed curtains of houses across the UK in recent years.

It is the sort of operation Home Secretary Jacqui Smith hopes to crush with her commitment last month to stiffen the laws on cannabis.

"In the past few years we have seen a massive growth in the commercial cultivation of cannabis in the UK," Ms Smith told Parliament. "This cannot be tolerated. Reclassifying cannabis will help to drive enforcement priorities in shutting those farms down."

" [I never stay] in the same house long enough for a pattern to build up "
Jimmy, on how he avoids detection
[Cannabis laws to be strengthened](#)

While gangs of "organised criminals" are the chief target, according to Ms Smith, "freelance" growers are unlikely to escape the crackdown. That means people like Jimmy (not his real name) who operates from an unassuming house on the outskirts of a large city in the north of England.

The 25-year-old says he is not a member of a gang - rather he styles himself a cannabis "fan", who grows mainly for his own use. His seeds are bred, he says, to produce plants of high potency. It's a trend that has been noted more widely in recent years - with stronger strains blamed for causing psychosis in some users.

The air in the attic is damp and warm, but not excessively so. For Jimmy, the advantage of his system is that once set up, it can be largely left to run itself. He calls himself a "medium-size" grower - once his flowers ripen in July, he hopes to harvest between 20 and 30 ounces of the drug. And while much of it, he says, he will smoke himself - during the interview he constantly pulls on powerful cannabis joints - the rest is given to friends.

IN TODAY'S MAGAZINE



Cannabis farm

A typical family home but for one difference - what's in the attic



Man-size lizard

You're on holiday faced by a Komodo dragon. What to do?



Life's too short

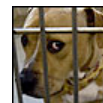
Why slow life sucks and pressure's a good thing



Raising hell

Why wayward stars behaving badly fascinate us so much

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Daily Mini-Quiz

Collie, cocker spaniel, Jack Russell - which is among most-abandoned dogs?

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Police raid

But his casual attitude belies the fact that he would face severe punishment if caught. Production of cannabis - the legal term for growing - is punishable by 14 years in prison.

Jimmy is constantly aware of the dangers his criminal activities pose - a few days before the interview, the house directly opposite was raided by the police. He thinks they may have been tipped off by the odour of cannabis - plus, possibly, a steep electricity bill.



Inside Jimmy's cannabis factory house

Power bills are potentially the biggest weakness - he estimates his current crop will set him back over £300 on electricity alone.

Other growers, in particular criminal gangs, bypass the problem by wiring directly - and often dangerously - into the electricity mains. Fire is a serious risk - in London in 2006, 50 cannabis farms were discovered as a result of house fires.

The real secret to avoid capture, he says, is to "keep moving". He never stays "in the same house long enough for a pattern to build up".

But although penalties for cannabis cultivation were toughened in 2004, the government hopes its move to return the drug to its Class B status will spawn a wider crackdown by police. It also plans to clamp down on the sort of supplies that Jimmy can currently buy legally for his cannabis cultivation.

FALL IN CANNABIS USE

Cannabis use among young people appears to be falling, despite downgrading in 2004

According to the British crime survey, 20.9% of 16-24-year-olds used cannabis in 2006-7, compared with 28.2% in 1998-99

Among 16-59-year-olds, use down to 8.2% or 2.6m people

After giving a tour of his house, Jimmy needs to stock up on supplies and heads to an anonymous warehouse on the south side of the city.

Garden centre equipment

Here, the shopkeeper - a taciturn individual with heavy tattoos on both arms - watches silently as his customer inspects an extensive array of cannabis paraphernalia: thick black plastic sheeting (to block out ambient light), state-of-the-art irrigation systems, bulbs.

None of this equipment is illegal. Indeed, the hydroponics industry argues - and the police reluctantly agree - most of it can be purchased quite legally at ordinary garden centres.

But in a report earlier this year, the government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs suggested lawmakers looked at whether cannabis seeds could be covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act.

SKUNK

So-called because it has a very strong smell

Three times stronger than other types of cannabis

Contains much higher levels of the active ingredient - tetrahydrocannabinol (THC)

Now accounts for up to 80% of samples seized by police

Six years ago it accounted for 15% of sample

Unsurprisingly, the ease with which profits can be made from growing cannabis means bigger players than Jimmy are cramming into the business - namely, gangs of organised criminals, many of them Vietnamese in origin.

Cmdr Allan Gibson, of the Metropolitan Police, estimates half the factories raided in London had been set up and run by Vietnamese gangs. Cmdr Gibson, who also heads up the fight against cannabis cultivation for the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) describes how a typical factory comes about.

A gang member normally approaches a landlord and offers to pay six months rent in advance. He and his cohorts then set to work,

blacking out windows and converting as much of the house as possible - sometimes gutting it in the process - into "grow-rooms", complete with lamps and irrigation systems.

Code of conduct

"We would estimate it usually takes just one harvest - usually in three months - for the gang to turn a profit," he says. "This is why it is vital to raid the houses as soon as they start up - that hurts the gangs in their pockets."

"This is not a victimless crime. Cannabis is a harmful drug - which is why the government wants to raise its classification."

Acpo is in discussion with the Home Office about ways of tackling organised cultivation. Measures might include an onus on landlords to check out potential tenants more thoroughly. Those who sold equipment that might be used to produce cannabis could also face regulation, says Cmdr Gibson. The possibility of tightened rules is now starting to worry those who those who supply growing equipment. Phil Kilv, who organises an annual trade exhibition where suppliers come to show off their wares, says discussions are being held about a "code of conduct" within the industry.



The Metropolitan Police show off one of their thermal imaging cameras

"We are looking at age restrictions on who we supply to. We also need to make sure that we are not supplying criminal gangs. For example, that could mean limits on the amount of fertilisers we supply."

Back in his attic and surrounded by his plants, cannabis enthusiast Jimmy also muses on the direction the cannabis business seems to be taking.

"It's a big shame that the organised gangs are taking over," he says. "They don't believe in cannabis - to them it's just a way to make money."

Add your comments on this story, using the form below.

I started growing weed as a hobby grower in 1994, when hydroponics were first emerging as a major force in the UK growing scene. I used to crop quite enough for personal use - worked out at about 1,500 grams a year, or an eighth (3.5-4 grams) a day. The growing scene is more established now and the quality of some of the equipment involved has improved somewhat but really little has changed in the 14 years since (incidentally, this "Skunk" people keep writing about was bred in the USA in the 1970s, so nothing new there either). I can understand why the police want to bust people growing huge numbers of plants for commercial purposes - especially if they are stealing electricity (cheapskates) - but I do hope they don't waste their time busting hobby growers. Safely done, it really is a victimless crime (unless you consider the user-grower to be the victim of their own vices). Cannabis is harmful, yes, but not particularly so.

w.abc1.male, London

Two things wrong with this article, cannabis use is a victimless crime and it is a lot less harmful than the two best selling taxed drugs in the country, alcohol and cigarettes. With all the crime that goes on in this country couldn't the police concentrate on something a bit more important instead of helping MP's score political points!

Paul McConnell, Carnoustie

At least this way the small home grower for personal use is not targeted and actual DEALERS are in the line of fire

annon, london

I'm not sure how cracking down on small time growers is going to discourage criminal gangs. Is this not going to only drive up price and also only spur on the big risk takers (hardened criminals)? I

think the government should talk to Arnie in California for some tips and ask him about the tax revenue from cannabis. Police officers should be employed to tackle real crime. As for taking it out of the hands of criminal gangs? There is only one answer. All others are lip service or outdated thinking.

bob,

I run my own IT business from home, and have at least 5 web servers and other computers running 24/7 in my loft. I can't wait for the police to use their IR camera around here: my house will stand out like a sore thumb.

John, Southampton

"Toughening" the law just makes cultivation less attractive to small scale enthusiast farmers like Jimmy, and more lucrative to gangsters. Organised crime bosses are undoubtedly ecstatic with the Government's U-turn on cannabis policy, which will do absolutely nothing either to reduce supply, or to improve quality and thereby reduce risk.

Billy, Leeds

We live in a quiet village in Norfolk. The house next door to ours was being rented out although we never saw anyone there. The next thing we knew the police had turned up and we found out the house was being used as a cannabis factory. Hopefully there will be a crackdown on this.

Louise, Norwich, England

How interesting, the police first relax the laws and grow shops appear around the country and then they sit back and wait for people to start so that they can bust them. What a complete waste of time and police resources. Aren't we forgetting that tax is paid on the equipment which in turn goes back into society. Perhaps if this country had a less sensationalist, more informed view of cannabis (a natural growing weed) it would be legalised therefore becoming a taxed item like anything else we can buy in a shop. Perhaps then so called 'criminals' and 'users' i.e elderly people with back pain or arthritis to give just one example wouldn't be imprisoned and the police could find the real criminals selling crack cocaine and heroin.

L, Norwich England

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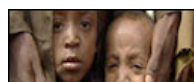
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