



CANNABIS FARM CLAMPDOWN: THE FALLOUT

Steve Sampson on signs that the UK's cannabis growing gangs are feeling the heat from increased police attention

The police clampdown on the explosion of commercial cannabis farms in the UK is forcing some dealers to return to importing high-grade strains of cannabis from growers in Amsterdam.

In January, the Association of Chief Police Officers (Acpo) revealed police forces are closing down an estimated 200-300 cannabis farms each month and that £60 million of illegal cannabis crops was identified and destroyed by UK law enforcement agencies in 2008.

The boom in commercial cannabis cultivation has been widely placed at the door of Vietnamese gangs, which have been operating highly efficient farms in residential homes and industrial estates, replicating a business model they developed in their domestic market of Vietnam, then honed in Canada and exported to the UK.

One established drug dealer, who

previously sold Vietnamese skunk through East London 'cafes' to around 1,000 customers a week, told Druglink enforcement has meant that supply from Vietnamese growers is drying up and dealers are being forced to return to their former suppliers.

Relaxed and smartly dressed and in his mid-30s, Mark looks more the business executive at play than drug dealer, and the orderly atmosphere of his establishment more reminiscent of a social club rather than crack house.

According to Mark, the police clampdown has disrupted the supply chain to the extent that the Vietnamese gangs can no longer assure the quantity of supply or the quality offered by legal growers in Amsterdam. This product is trafficked through Liverpool's drug gangs – which have established and notorious links with the drug trade in

cannabis from Holland, cocaine from Colombia and heroin from Turkey.

"At the moment everything is coming via the Liverpool gangs from Amsterdam. All of the major Vietnamese growers are holding back, as they have lost so many farms. So for now everything is Dutch, which is good for smokers – the quality is always better. The Vietnamese produce very quickly, it is not as strong and often not dried properly. For us to exist we need volume and quality, or our customers just go elsewhere."

Mark's cafes are open from noon to 11pm seven days a week and attract students, City kids and blue-collar workers each week. They are under constant scrutiny from police, although police raids reap few rewards as the quantities of cash and product on the premises are kept to a minimum. Deals

are restricted to £10 and £20 bags for personal use. Hard drug use on the premises is banned.

"The police can't close us but a lack of supply could. My Vietnamese suppliers say that ever since the police are carrying infra red heat trackers in their vans and using sniffer dogs they have lost some big operations. They are looking for a way forward, but who knows what they will do?"

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Matthew Atha, an expert witness in drug court cases and director of the Independent Drug Monitoring Unit, says, as a result of enforcement, the price of skunk on the wholesale market has risen for the first time since 1994.

But he believes that, although most of his caseload has shifted from cannabis trafficking cases to cultivation cases, the market share of UK grown cannabis has been over-blown. "The kind of cannabis farms run by the Vietnamese gangs would not come anywhere near to supplying the demand for cannabis in the UK," says Atha. "A lot of it is still being bought in bulk from Holland.

"Two years ago I covered a case where a gang was importing 100 kilos of Dutch skunk each week – that's a lot of suburban semis." Atha says 100 kilos is around the equivalent to the harvests from around 20 large commercial scale cultivation systems in residential properties or 5-10 commercial scale cultivations in industrial or agricultural premises.

He believes that, contrary to suggestions by Acpo, there is not enough 'excess' cannabis in the UK to warrant exporting the drug to other parts of Europe.

In January, Acpo issued recommendations from research

conducted into the impact of the Vietnamese cannabis farm model on the UK drug sector and economy.

Acpo is seeking to target criminal drug dealing gangs such as Mark's and the flow of money transfers to Vietnam and Far East countries. It is also to increase the monitoring of the businesses that supply cultivation equipment and drug paraphernalia.

Vietnamese gangs working in the UK are part of a global network involved in a diverse number of illegal activities such as drug production and distribution, people trafficking, kidnapping and extortion, according to Acpo.

They have a reputation as audacious criminals, capable of creating markets, developing niches and wresting control of the trade in the face of established opposition, such as Canada's Hells Angels.

Their rise in cannabis production has turned the traditional drug importation model on its head by growing as close to the market as possible. They have also restricted themselves to cultivation, using established criminal gangs such as Mark's to supply the UK market and undercut overseas suppliers on non-bulk orders.

One fear is that UK-based Vietnamese crime groups may diversify into the production and supply of synthetic drugs, particularly crystal meth. Intelligence is limited and the judgement is based on the fact that the UK methylamphetamine market is ripe for growth more than any current demand. It is an area the Vietnamese are already involved with in the Middle East, while synthetic drug labs are not as easy to identify as heat seeping cannabis farms.

Yet there there could be signs the Vietnamese may be crossing borders to avoid the heat. According to figures gathered by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, cannabis traditionally supplied through smuggling in Sweden is increasingly being replaced by local production, in a new breed of suburban cannabis farms. Police are blaming an influx of Vietnamese gangs replicating the business model they adopted in Canada and the UK. "Now it is thought that the expertise has also spread to the Vietnamese population in the Nordic countries," said Johnny Gyllensjö, of the Swedish police's cannabis task force.



Vatican stance sparks unholy row on global policy

The Vatican has controversially rejected the use of harm reduction strategies such as needle exchange and methadone maintenance schemes – days before a major 10-year UN drug policy declaration.

A Vatican statement said that using drugs is "anti-life" and "so-called harm reduction leads to liberalisation of the use of drugs".

The statement was issued in the run-up to the UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) on drugs in Vienna on March 11 – where, as Druglink went to press, a host of European, Latin American and Oceanic countries are hoping to install a harm reduction clause within the UN's new 10 year plan.

The move by the Vatican coincided with a decision by Italy to join Sweden in becoming the only European countries to oppose the harm reduction clause. The US, Russia and Japan are also powerful and vocal opponents of a global commitment to harm reduction methods.

"By making a statement against harm reduction, the Vatican has indicated that its moral objection to drug use is more important than its commitment to the sanctity of life," said the charity Release.

"If the Vatican is allowed to influence the UN to adopt a naïve and ineffective drug policy, it will needlessly lead to the increased spread of blood-borne viruses and the death of thousands more people from HIV/Aids."