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The Nature and Extent of Marijuana Growing Operations in Mission British Columbia: A 14 Year Review (1997 – 2010)



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Introduction

This report describes the nature and extent of marihuana growing operations in Mission British Columbia. The report is based on an examination of operations coming to the attention of police over the 14 year period of January 01, 1997 to the end of 2010. Using the same methodology of the 2002 research conducted by Plecas et al.¹ and the 2005 research conducted by Plecas et al.², this examination joined data collected through that previous research with data collected through recent police file reviews of cases coming to the attention of police for the seven year period 2004 through 2010. Those police file reviews were completed in 2011 and collected data about the location of the grow operation, the nature and origin of the complaint, the police investigation, the size and type of the growing operation, the amount of marihuana seized, the presence of other drugs, the presence of various cultivation equipment, and decisions made by the prosecution with respect to criminal charges. Importantly, for comparison purposes, the researcher also had the benefit of being provided with police statistics on the number of marihuana growing operations coming to the attention of police in British Columbia overall for the period 2004 through 2010.

As the report will describe, the number and size of grow operations in Mission has grown dramatically over the last 14 years. Not unexpectedly considering the growth in the number and size of operations, the amount of electrical theft has also grown. As well, the likelihood of fires has grown substantially to where, in the last five years, on average, 9.1% of structures hosting indoor marihuana growing operations caught fire. Despite these increases, the percentage of cases where police fully investigated incidents of marihuana growing operations coming to their attention in Mission substantially declined, as did the percentage of founded cases moved forward for charges. None of this will be news to those familiar with the problem of marihuana growing operations in Mission. Instead, this report quantifies the extent of the problem and the need to seek out new prevention and response strategies.

Incidents of Alleged Marihuana Growing Operations Coming to the Attention of Police

In Mission, not only has the number of marihuana grow operations coming to the attention of police increased substantially over the 14 year period studied, but the numbers have increased far more than for the province overall. As demonstrated in Table 1, the number of marihuana grow operations coming to the attention of police in British Columbia each year over the last five has doubled over what it was in the late 1990's. In effect, the average number of grow operations that came to the attention of police on average each year in the last five in Mission is nearly five times more than what it was in the late 1990's. While there has been a notable decline in the number of

¹ Plecas, D., Dandurand, Y., Chin, V., & Segger, T. (2002). *Marihuana Growing Operations in British Columbia: An Empirical Survey (1997-2000)*. University of the Fraser Valley.

² Plecas, D., Malm, A., & Kinney, B. (2005). *Marihuana Growing Operations in British Columbia Revised, 1997 – 2003*. University of the Fraser Valley

marihuana grow operations across the province generally in the last five years over the previous five years, Mission has seen an increase in the average number of marihuana growing operations per year.

TABLE 1: AVERAGE NUMBER OF MARIHUANA CULTIVATION INCIDENTS PER YEAR THAT CAME TO THE ATTENTION OF THE POLICE (1997 - 2010)

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
British Columbia	2,310	4,975	4,571
Mission	54	106	243

For further context, when considering Mission against the rest of British Columbia, controlling for population differences in 2010 (see Table 2), the number of marihuana grow operations coming to the attention of police per 1,000 population in Mission was seven times the provincial average.

TABLE 2: RELATIVE NUMBER OF MARIHUANA GROW OPERATIONS COMING TO THE ATTENTION OF THE POLICE IN 2010

	Population 2010*	% of Total BC Population	# of Cases as a % of the Total # of Cases in BC	Rate per 1,000 Population in 2010	Total # of Cases
Mission	37,574	.82%	5.4	7.10	267
BC Overall	4,530,960	100%	100	1.10	4,974

*Source of population statistics: <http://www.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/data/pop/pop/BCPop.asp>

How Marihuana Grow Operations Come to the Attention of Police

While marihuana grow operations come to the attention of police from a variety of sources, the most common source of that attention in Mission remains crime stopper tips and anonymous informants (71 per cent). As demonstrated in Table 3, the proportion of time crime stoppers and anonymous informants was the initial source of information climbed in the last five years from a minority of cases (44 per cent) in the late 1990's. Notably, these increases have replaced declines in the proportion of cases where marihuana grow operations came to police attention through police serving a warrant or investigating another crime. This is not surprising given changes in the size of grow operations and how individuals associated to operations are involved. As will be noted below, there are far fewer small grow operations in Mission than in the past and fewer instances where suspects are on site as often.

TABLE 3: SOURCE LEADING TO OPENING A MARIHUANA CULTIVATION FILE IN MISSION

Source	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Crime Stoppers/Informant	44%	70%	71%
BC Hydro	1%	2%	13%
Other = Crime	27%	8%	6%
Fire Department	0%	1%	4%
Other = Traffic Violation	3%	5%	2%
Neighbour	2%	3%	2%
Grow Rip	0%	0%	2%
Landlord	5%	4%	1%
General Investigation	8%	5%	0%
Routine Check	5%	3%	0%
While Serving a Warrant	5%	1%	0%

Investigations of Marihuana Grow Operations

Just because a grow operation comes to the attention of police does not mean that the police are able to fully investigate the incident. A lack of resources is often given as the reason police do not even conduct a preliminary investigation. Even where they do conduct a preliminary investigation, sometimes police are unable to find enough evidence to support obtaining a search warrant. Accordingly, a significant percentage of grow operations coming to the attention of police do not lead to a full investigation. Across the province, historically, the percentage of incidents in which the police took any action on a marihuana grow operation that came to their attention declined from 93% in 1997 to 78% in 2003 (Plecas et al., 2005). Further, the percentage of time a full investigation was conducted declined from 91% to 52% (Plecas et al., 2005). In Mission, the percentage of time any action was taken on a grow operation coming to the attention of police declined from 82% in the late 1990's to 49% in the last five years. Why the decline in Mission has been so substantial is not entirely clear, but no doubt part of the reason has been a lack of resources. Another reason would be related to the increasingly sophisticated nature of grow operations and the size of properties they are hosted on. Presumably, this has made it more difficult to get information to justify obtaining a search warrant.

In Mission, in cases that were fully investigated, they usually proved to be founded, as has been the case historically with marihuana grow operations throughout the province (see Plecas et al., 2005). The percentage of cases proving to be founded in the last five years is up to 87% of cases from 75% of cases being founded in the late 1990's, but down from 93% between 2000 and 2005. Included in these percentages are a relatively small number of cases in Mission where clear evidence of a marihuana grow operation was apparent, but the operation was founded too late (i.e. the operation was discovered after the marihuana had been harvested and, therefore, there was not enough evidence to proceed with charges). In terms of detail, the number of such cases averaged three in the 1990's, four over the 2000 to 2005 period, and 15 in each of the last five years. These numbers were consistent with the percentage of fully investigated cases historically across the province in which operations are discovered too late (see Plecas et al., 2005).

Type of Marihuana Growing Operations in Mission

Similar to the rest of British Columbia, in Mission, the vast majority of marihuana grow operations have been located indoors (Plecas et al., 2005). As demonstrated in Table 4, approximately three-quarters (76 per cent) of grow operations in Mission known to police since 2006 were located in a house and another 19% in a detached building. In terms of change over time, the percentage of operations located within detached buildings was more than double in the last five years compared to the ten years prior. Moreover, the percentage of outdoor operations in the last five years was half what it was in the ten years prior.

TABLE 4: LOCATION OF FOUNDED MARIHUANA GROWING OPERATIONS IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
House	77%	82%	76%
Detached Building	7%	7%	19%
Outdoors – Private	4%	5%	2%
Outdoors – Crown	5%	2%	2%
Warehouse / Commercial	0%	1%	1%
Other / Vehicle	7%	0%	1%
Apartment / Multiple Units	1%	3%	0%

The Size of Marihuana Grow Operations in Mission

The size of grow operations in Mission has increased substantially since the late 1990's. As demonstrated in Table 5, the average number of plants seized per indoor operation in the last five years (X = 775 plants) was at least a fourfold increase since the late 1990's.

TABLE 5: AVERAGE NUMBER OF PLANTS INVOLVED WHEN PLANTS WERE SEIZED BY TYPE OF OPERATION IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Indoor	186	479	775
Outdoor	407	299	162
Other	80	220	185

Also noteworthy was the increase in the amount of harvested marihuana seized through indoor operations. As Table 6 shows, the amount of dried marihuana seized per operation on average is seven times more since the late nineties.

TABLE 6: AVERAGE NUMBER OF KILOGRAMS OF HARVESTED MARIHUANA SEIZED IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Indoor	3.4	26.1	21.1
Outdoor	.06	.90	.94
Other	.75	0	0

Translating the amount of marihuana seized per operation into pounds and considering the number of seizures each year, the quantity of marihuana seized in Mission increased substantially over the past 14 years (see Table 7). Specifically, the volume seized annually increased essentially

six fold since the late 1990's to where the total seized averaged 2,987 pounds per year in each of the last five years; an amount nearly double the average number of pounds per year over the 2000 to 2005 period.

TABLE 7: TOTAL AVERAGE AMOUNT OF MARIHUANA SEIZED PER YEAR IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Total Pounds Seized in Plant Form	419	1,006	2,530
Total Pounds Seized in Harvested Form	55	633	457
Total Pounds Seized	474	1,639	2,987

Value of Marihuana Seized

The procedure to estimate the average market value of seized marihuana was the same as the one used in the Plecas et al. (2011)³ study that provided a method of estimating the value of domestic and export marihuana production levels. That study conservatively estimated that the average wholesale market value of one pound of dried British Columbia marihuana was \$2,000 per pound. Using this estimate, and based on the estimate of marihuana seized in Mission, the value of marihuana seized per year over the last 5 years would yield a market value of approximately \$5,974,000 per year. This represents a six fold increase in the market value of marihuana seized per year in the late 1990's (\$948,000), and nearly a doubling (\$3,278,000) from the period between 2000 and 2005.

Electrical Consumption – Fire and Theft

One significant issue with indoor marihuana growing operations is the matter of electrical consumption. Notwithstanding that it should be considered an issue because use of electricity for growing marihuana detracts from the provincial desire to conserve electricity in British Columbia, it is an issue because growers will often steal the electricity they need for their operations and, regardless of whether they are stealing or not, the electrical systems they put in place are commonly overloaded and do not conform to bylaw requirements. Consequently, there are risks to first responders and there is a risk of fire. In this regard, it is noteworthy that 9.1% of structures hosting founded indoor growing operations in Mission in the last five years caught fire. That is almost twice the percentage of fires associated to indoor grow operations since the late 1990's (4.8 per cent) and a slight increase from the 2000 to 2005 period (7.7 per cent). However, this increase should not be surprising in view of the increase in the size of marihuana grow operations in Mission.

³ Plecas, D., Diplock, J., Garis, L., Carlisle, B., Neal, P., & Landry, S. (2011). The Marihuana Indoor Production Calculator: A Tool for Estimating Domestic and Export Production Levels and Values. *The Journal of Criminal Justice Research*, 1(2).

In terms of electrical theft, this too has increased three fold in terms of the percentage of operations since the late 1990's that installed a bypass to steal power. Specifically, as demonstrated in Table 8, a majority (57 per cent) of operations over the last five years were stealing electricity.

TABLE 8: THEFT OF ELECTRICITY IN CASES OF INDOOR MARIHUANA GROWING OPERATIONS IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
% of Indoor Growing Operations Involving Theft of Electricity	17%	13%	57%
Average Value of electricity Theft per Operation	--*	\$22,532	\$16,399

*Data not available

Further, it is worth noting that those growing operations involving electricity theft have been consistently larger than operations that do not involve electricity theft.

TABLE 9: TOTAL NUMBER OF LIGHTS SEIZED PER MARIHUANA GROWING OPERATION IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Lights Seized (No electricity theft)	*	21.4	20.9
Lights Seized (electricity theft)	*	50.9	37.1

*Data not available

Suspects Identified in Marihuana Grow Operations

The analyses conducted for this report did not include an analysis of the characteristics of suspects found at marihuana growing operations. Instead, it only considered the matter of whether suspects were present at the time police arrived on scene. The percentage of time a suspect was present upon police arrival over the last five years (82 per cent) was basically the same as in the late 1990's (80 per cent), but higher than between 2000 and 2005 (69 per cent). In any case, the issue of suspects' presence is important because, unless suspects are present, the police are generally required to treat the case as a no case seizure in the first instance.

Case Seizures

Not every instance where police showed up at a founded grow operation led to a recommendation of charges. As already noted, if there are no suspects present, there will be no charges. Beyond that, there are often legal issues that preclude the police from doing anything more than seizing the marihuana and equipment found. In any case, it is interesting that the percentage of instances where the police treated the case as a "no case" seizure climbed substantially since the late 1990's. Specifically, as demonstrated in Table 10, the percentage of incidents of marihuana growing operations with suspects present that became case seizures was very low (46 per cent) in the late 1990's, but increased to, on average, 62% over the last five years. The percentage increase was even greater when considering those instances where suspects were present.

TABLE 10: PERCENTAGE OF FOUNDED MARIHUANA GROWING OPERATIONS CLASSIFIED AS CASE SEIZES AND PERCENTAGE WHERE SUSPECTS WERE PRESENT IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Percentage of Case Seizures	46%	43%	62%
Percentage of Case Seizures Where Suspects were Present	50%	55%	77%

Beyond the effect of suspects being present, it is also interesting to note that the likelihood of a marihuana grow operation being treated as a “case” seizure would also appear to be affected by the number of plants involved – with “case” seizures on average involving more plants (see Table 11).

TABLE 11: AVERAGE NUMBER OF PLANTS SEIZED COMPARING ‘NO CASE’ AND ‘CASE’ SEIZURES IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
No Case Seizures	131	252	524
Case Seizures	293	719	841

Charges Laid For Marihuana Growing Operations

In cases where a founded growing operation was not classified as a ‘no case’ seizure, police recommended charges to Crown and those recommendations were usually accepted (see Table 12). Of note, this has been rather consistent since the late 1990's. While these percentages are impressive, they are, of course, less so when considering them against the total number of cases coming to the attention of police (see Table 12).

TABLE 12: NUMBER OF CASE SEIZURES AND PERCENTAGE OF CASE SEIZURES THAT RESULTED IN CHARGES IN MISSION

	Late 1990's	2000 to 2005	2006 to 2010
Number of Case Seizures	13	16	37
Percentage Case Seizures that Resulted in Charges	85%	93%	94%
Percentage of Total Number of Cases Coming to the Attention of the Police Which Resulted in Charges	20%	14%	14%

Conclusion

As noted in the introduction to this report, the fact that marihuana grow operations in Mission have grown substantially in number and size over the last 14 years will be of no surprise to those tasked with dealing with the problem. It will also be no surprise that these operations often involve substantial electricity theft and pose a serious fire hazard. Moreover, we should expect that given the size of the average indoor grow operations in Mission (i.e. an average of 775 plants) and given the likelihood that each is set up to produce four crops a year, the offenders who operate them today are, on average, producing marihuana with a wholesale value of more than \$400,000 annually. Accordingly, offenders have a great incentive to remain in the business. This is especially so given that the likelihood of prosecution for operating a marihuana growing operation is relatively small. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the likelihood of a marihuana growing

operation that came to the attention of police in Mission leading to charges over the last five years was essentially one in seven. With the assumption that the actual number of marihuana grow operations in Mission is at least three times the number coming to the attention of police, the odds of any one grower facing charges is about one in twenty.

In considering the results of present examination it is interesting to compare them to the results of our near identical examination of marihuana growing operations in the Cariboo region of British Columbia.⁴ Specifically, the Cariboo region has also experienced a dramatic increase in the number and size of marihuana growing operations and, like Mission, is still far from being able to deal successfully with the numbers involved.

⁴ Plecas, D., Chaisson, K., and Garis, L. (2011). The Nature and Extent of Marihuana Growing Operations in the Cariboo Region of British Columbia. University of the Fraser Valley.