

AUSTRALIAN SUBURBS ‘HOT BEDS’ FOR THE NATION’S CANNABIS

- For immediate release -

Suburban Australian neighbourhoods are where much of the cannabis is now grown and distributed in Australia, according to a new report released today. The Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), who authored the report, found that hydroponically grown cannabis is the most commonly detected form of the plant.

The National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre (NCPIC) Criminal Justice Bulletin reveals that hydroponic plantations are seen by growers as easier to conceal and as producing better yields than bush crops. These reasons, coupled with the hydroponic industry’s high profitability, means it is unlikely to slow in the short to medium term.

The National Cannabis Prevention and Information Centre is based at the University of New South Wales (UNSW).

The majority of cannabis distributed in Australia is grown in Australia. Unlike some other drugs, cannabis is difficult to import due to its bulky size and pungent odour. The success of a locally-based production industry has allowed complex networks to form and sophisticated concealment techniques to be used in the distribution of large amounts of cannabis around the country.

The impact of hydroponically grown cannabis on the consumer is not known but the Director of NCPIC, Professor Jan Copeland, raised a number of concerns about the phenomenon.

“It would appear that organized crime is increasingly involved in the cultivation of cannabis,” said Professor Copeland. “Evidence from overseas about the contamination of cannabis in an attempt to maximise crop yields is very concerning.”

“In addition to fertilizers and chemicals, such as pesticides, there have been reports of glass beads being added to the plant in the UK to mimic the appearance of greater potency. In Germany, lead particles were added to increase weight. These occurrences, although rare, are of great concern and have resulted in hospitalisations.”

The Bulletin goes on to explain that despite elaborate distribution networks, at the consumer level, the majority of cannabis is sold or given away in private residences through social

contacts. In the 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, around 70 per cent of cannabis users indicated that they sourced the drug through friends or acquaintances rather than a drug-dealer or elsewhere.

In terms of price, it was found that quality and type of cannabis are the most important determining factors. Hydroponically grown cannabis is more expensive than cannabis grown outdoors. This is because hydroponically grown cannabis often has higher yields of heads and buds, which contain higher quantities of THC (the psychoactive component of the plant).

While the overall number of cannabis arrests has dropped since the mid-1990s, more people are still arrested for supplying cannabis than any other drug. There has been a relatively stable pattern for the number of cannabis seizures over the last five years but an overall decrease in the weight of cannabis seizures in the last three years which is thought to reflect the greater detection of smaller, hydroponically grown cannabis crops.

Interestingly, despite the popularity and prevalence of hydroponically grown cannabis, it has been found that the larger the cannabis cultivation venture, the more likely it is that there will be multiple players involved and that the crops will be located outdoors.

"Cannabis use can lead to a range of problems," said Professor Copeland. "When you add organized crime, hydroponics and the possibility of unknown fertilizers, chemicals and other products to the mix, the range and severity of potential harms is increased."

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