



Research paper

Global patterns of domestic cannabis cultivation: Sample characteristics and patterns of growing across eleven countries



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ABSTRACT

Background: This article aims to provide an overview of: demographic characteristics; experiences with growing cannabis; methods and scale of growing operations; reasons for growing; personal use of cannabis and other drugs; participation in cannabis and other drug markets; contacts with the criminal justice system for respondents to an online survey about cannabis cultivation drawn from eleven countries ($N = 6530$). Important similarities and differences between the national samples recruited will be discussed.

Methods: This paper utilizes data from the online web survey of predominantly 'small-scale' cannabis cultivators in eleven countries conducted by the Global Cannabis Cultivation Research Consortium (GCCRC). Here we focus primarily on descriptive statistics to highlight key similarities and differences across the different national samples.

Results: Overall there was a great deal of similarity across countries in terms of: demographic characteristics; experiences with growing cannabis; methods and scale of growing operations; reasons for growing; use of cannabis and other drugs; participation in cannabis and other drug markets, and; contacts with the criminal justice system. In particular, we can recognise that a clear majority of those small-scale cannabis cultivators who responded to our survey are primarily motivated for reasons other than making money from cannabis supply and have minimal involvement in drug dealing or other criminal activities.

Conclusions: These growers generally come from 'normal' rather than 'deviant' backgrounds. Some differences do exist between the samples drawn from different countries suggesting that local factors (political, geographical, cultural, etc.) may have some influence on how small-scale cultivators operate, although differences in recruitment strategies in different countries may also account for some differences observed.

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Introduction

The traditional view of a global cannabis market consisting of production in developing countries for export to consumers in

the developed world is increasingly outdated. Large scale outdoor cultivation has been long established in countries like Australia, Canada, USA and New Zealand. With the advent of indoor cultivation techniques and the wide dissemination of both technical expertise and growing technologies, cannabis is now produced on a significant level across most of the industrialised world (Potter, Bouchard, & Decorte, 2011). With 'traditional' producer countries in the developing world continuing to cultivate, the UN confirms

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cannabis production to be a truly global phenomenon with 172 countries and territories reporting cultivation in the 2008 World Drug Report (a year where particular attention was given to the phenomenon of cannabis cultivation; UNODC, 2008). This globalisation of cannabis cultivation continues to be a significant feature in global drug markets, and also a particular problem for researchers: “Providing a global picture of levels of cannabis cultivation and production remains a difficult task: although cannabis is produced in practically every country in the world, its cultivation is largely localized and, more often than not, feeds local markets.” (UNODC, 2013, p. xi)

Research into cannabis cultivation in the developed world to date has largely consisted of nationally focused work generating typologies of cannabis growers (e.g. Nguyen & Bouchard, 2010; Potter & Dann, 2005; Weisheit, 1991), or national studies focusing on specific aspects of cultivation in individual countries (e.g. Bouchard, 2007; Bouchard, Alain, & Nguyen, 2009; Decorte, 2010; Douglas & Sullivan, 2013; Hakkarainen, Frank, Perälä, & Dahl, 2011a; Hakkarainen, Perälä, & Metso, 2011b; Hammersvik, Sandberg, & Pedersen, 2012; Malm, 2006; Plecas, Malm, & Kinney, 2005; Potter, 2010a; Weisheit, 1992). While there is some work that discusses cultivation in neighbouring states (Hakkarainen, Frank, et al., 2011a on Finland and Denmark; Jansen, 2002 on Switzerland and the Netherlands), and a compendium that draws on studies from a dozen different countries and regions around the world (Decorte, Potter, & Bouchard, 2011), there has been an absence of any significant internationally comparative research. However, such a global phenomenon would clearly benefit from some coordinated international research, a point also recognised by the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs in a recent report calling specifically for further “research on the different methods of cannabis cultivation and the role of cannabis seeds therein” (INCB, 2013, para. 69).

Internationally comparative approaches to research provide many benefits, particularly around providing insights into how national legal and cultural variations impact on both patterns of (specific types of) crime and on assessing policy responses to (specific) crime(s) (e.g. Heidensohn, 2008). Indeed, Hardie-Bick, Sheptycki, & Wardak (2005; 1) assert that “[a]ny criminology worthy of the name should contain a comparative dimension. The contents of cultural meanings that are loaded into the subject of criminology are too variable for it to be otherwise. It is fair to say that most of the important points made by leading scholars of criminology are comparative in nature”. In the example of cannabis cultivation, we can begin to see how patterns of cultivation, both common and similar in terms of global trends, may or may not differ between different countries and regions. The research reported here aims to explore both similarities and differences in small-scale cannabis cultivation in eleven different countries. The potential to inform future policy responses is obvious.

This paper reports on the preliminary general findings of the (semi-) standardised International Cannabis Cultivation Questionnaire (ICCQ); (Decorte et al., 2012) developed by the Global Cannabis Cultivation Research Consortium (GCCRC) and conducted in eleven countries to date. We begin with a brief overview of our methodology before outlining some interesting general findings. Although we accept that sampling and other methodological issues necessitate some caution in generalising from these findings (see Barratt et al., in this issue; Barratt & Lenton, in this issue), we believe we can make a number of interesting and valid comparisons between the national and international patterns of domestic cannabis cultivation in our data set of respondents from this limited number of developed nations, at least for those that we might loosely think of as ‘small-scale cannabis growers’. In particular, we provide some comparative commentary on who grows cannabis, reasons for growing, methods of growing, market involvement

(‘dealing’), and contact with the police and other criminal activities of growers. As well as presenting some findings that are of interest in their own right, a key aim of this paper is also to provide some background for a series of papers (some in this edition, others under preparation) that will explore particular aspects of national and international patterns of cannabis cultivation in greater depth.

Methods

Our methodology has been described in some detail elsewhere (Barratt et al., 2012; Barratt et al., in this issue), so a brief overview will suffice for current purposes. Following on from successful online surveys into cannabis cultivation in Belgium (Decorte, 2010) and Denmark and Finland (Hakkarainen, Frank, et al., 2011a), the GCCRC sought to develop a standardised online survey to allow for the collection of meaningfully comparative data in all participating countries: the ICCQ (Decorte et al., 2012).

The 35 item core ICCQ includes modules on: experiences with growing cannabis; methods and scale of growing operations; reasons for growing; personal use of cannabis and other drugs; participation in cannabis and other drug markets; contact with the criminal justice system; involvement in other (non-drug related) illegal activities, and; demographic characteristics. Other modules were added by sub-sets of participating countries to reflect the differing research interests of those involved (see e.g. Hakkarainen et al., in this issue; Lenton, Frank, Barratt, Dahl, & Potter, in this issue; Nguyen, Malm, Bouchard, in this issue; Paoli and Decorte, in this issue). The ICCQ also includes items to test eligibility and recruitment source.

We implemented a broad-based recruitment strategy and techniques to maximise the breadth of recruitment coverage mindful of the different conditions within each of the countries studies. Promotion strategies included: an international project website and blog hosted at a .nl address to highlight our association with a model of cannabis control supported by many in our target population (i.e. the Dutch ‘coffee-shop’ model); Twitter recruitment involving following prominent cannabis Twitter accounts and engaging with cannabis users; discussions hosted on cannabis related online forums where the researchers continue to engage with respondents while answering questions about the study; posting to and engaging with Facebook groups associated with cannabis culture; mainstream media coverage (television, radio, newspaper); alternative media coverage through provision of flyers to alternative music shops, head shops, street press, festivals etc.; distribution of flyers to grow shops; online and hard-copy advertising in cannabis-related magazines and websites; providing social media sharing buttons so respondents can easily share the survey with their social networks; and providing a link to printable flyers so respondents who wished to pass details of the survey to their friends could do so more privately. The mix of strategies varied from country to country (see Barratt et al., in this issue for a fuller discussion); however many of these strategies were international, leading people to the project website (www.worldwideweeds.nl) where they could then choose the survey associated with their country of residence.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the internet-based research methods used here. Most importantly, samples of cannabis cultivators were volunteers, and not all cultivators had an equal chance of being included in the sample, resulting in coverage error. Our findings, therefore, cannot be said to represent all cannabis growers, and it is difficult to precisely estimate the importance of bias in our samples. Nevertheless there are various strategies we have taken to minimise sampling limitations. For example, we have used a wide variety of recruitment and promotion strategies and by removing any financial incentive to

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