

Marijuana grow-op industry hits Manitoba in big way

Last Updated: Wednesday, November 19, 2008 | 10:52 AM CT
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Police in Manitoba say more sophisticated marijuana

grow-ops are moving to the province. (CBC)

The multibillion-dollar marijuana growing industry in Canada has infiltrated Manitoba in a big way, as police say they are seeing much more sophisticated commercial operations and criminal gangs from out of province moving in.

It's becoming more common for police to raid commercial marijuana grow-ops in Winnipeg — operations set up with thousands of plants worth millions of dollars on the street. There have been more than 60 grow-ops raided in Winnipeg in 2008, and up to half of those arrested are from other parts of Canada.

The value of the average marijuana grow-op busted up by Winnipeg police is up by 30 per cent this year. Police say part of the draw bringing organized pot growers to Manitoba is relatively low housing prices.

"There's more plants. Bigger grows, more sophisticated grows and that leads me to believe that there is a more commercialized component to this," said Sgt. Kerry Baldwin of the Winnipeg Police Green Team.

"That goes far beyond making a living. That's a commercial operation is what that is."

The grow-ops are being set-up all over Winnipeg and the province. Some are in new communities with stunning half-million dollar homes, while others are set up in established neighbourhoods. On Monday, Winnipeg police raided two grow-ops less than one kilometre apart in the northwest area of the city, a raid that netted thousands of plants worth almost \$3 million and two arrests. And on Wednesday, two more raids in Fort Whyte and River Heights netted thousands more plants with a street value of over \$2.6 million, police said.

Police are saying as many as 50 per cent of those charged in recent drug busts come from other provinces: British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario.

Becoming sophisticated

Calgary-based Roger Morrison, a former police officer who has smashed more than 800 grow operations in his career, said the operations are becoming more sophisticated as they move from the West Coast farther east.

"The B.C. problem infiltrated Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and throughout Ontario now into the east," he said. "[We're seeing] the progression of primarily Asian organized crime with marijuana grow-ops go right across the country with the identical type of grow operations essentially the same plants too, genetic clones."

Police say those arrested often have no criminal records prior to their first bust. But experts say the operators work in teams: one person may focus on rewiring the electrical system in the home to steal hydroelectric power. Another might be an expert in harvesting the marijuana, while the third member of the team might be in charge of making sure the plants are watered and healthy.

Morrison says the grow operations are sophisticated and difficult to detect. And it's very hard to catch the financiers behind the operations.

"It's cell behaviour," he said. "I don't want to equate it to terrorism but it's the same type of structure where cells will operate where different groups will operate 10-15 grow operations."

"Only one person would know where the distribution point is, so it's very difficult for the traditional organized crime investigation to go up the ladder."