

Findings from the UK National Problem Profile Commercial Cultivation of Cannabis

"Three years on..."
July 2010



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Introduction

The 2010 UK National Problem Profile was commissioned by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) National Working Group on the Commercial Cultivation of Cannabis, in order to better understand the current picture of commercial cultivation of cannabis in the United Kingdom, and how this picture has changed since the completion of the National Baseline Assessment (November 2008) and National Problem Profile (March 2009).

In August 2008 a National Coordinator for Cannabis Cultivation was appointed. Shortly after this a Cannabis Working Group consisting of subject matter experts was formed. Their knowledge and understanding of the problem was enhanced by the establishment of SPOC networks throughout all police forces and law enforcement partners. January 26th 2009 saw the reclassification of cannabis from a Class C to a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

In relation to the reclassification the Home Secretary at the time, Jacqui Smith, commented:

"Cannabis is and always has been illegal. It now dominates the illegal drugs market in the UK and is stronger than ever before... the enforcement response must reflect the danger that the drug poses to individuals, and in turn to communities. It is also important that the organised criminals behind the growing threat of Cannabis farms feel the full force of the law, and that we use every opportunity and means to disrupt their activities so that the UK becomes a high risk place for them to operate. I also want to see more action against the trade in cannabis paraphernalia and will work with ACPO to look at how existing legislation and powers can be used by the police, local authorities and other partners to curtail the sale and promotion of these items."

In response to this, UK law enforcement have carried out a number of successful operations which have progressed beyond the closure of the factory and arrest of the person tending the plants, often referred to as 'the gardener'.

Although cannabis continues to be imported into the UK, the domestic commercial cultivation of cannabis has been escalating for a number of years. Figures have risen from an average of 800 cannabis factories per year between 2004 and 2007 to over 3,000 per year during the 2007/08 financial year. The current report has found that this average has risen once more, at a significant rate, to almost 7,000 factories per year. This enhanced detection situation highlights the increased focus of UK law enforcement over the last two years. It also indicates that this is an embedded form of criminality which demands continuing attention by law enforcement.

The main aims and objectives of the problem profile are to:

- Explain how the commercial cultivation picture has changed since the completion of the 2008 National Baseline Assessment.
- Determine emerging issues and trends.
- Determine present and potential risks and vulnerabilities to law enforcement and society.
- Present recommendations for action in order to alleviate and reduce these risks.

The following definition of commercial cultivation has been adopted by ACPO:

Any premises, whether commercial or residential, shall be deemed a cannabis farm if it has the following:-

The premises, or part therein, has been adapted to such an extent that normal usage would be inhibited and usually present within the premises, or part therein, are items solely concerned for the production of cannabis, i.e.

Hydroponics system

High intensity lighting

Ventilation/Extractor fans

Any other associated equipment, and/or

Electricity meter bypassed (abstraction of electricity)

The overall appearance of the venue, in combination with any available intelligence will provide an indication as to whether the site is, was, or is intended to be a cannabis farm. It is irrelevant how many plants are present on site. For example, there may be no plants if the site has been made ready to commence cultivation. Alternatively the crop may have already been harvested and only the remnants of the harvested crop will be apparent.

Methodology:

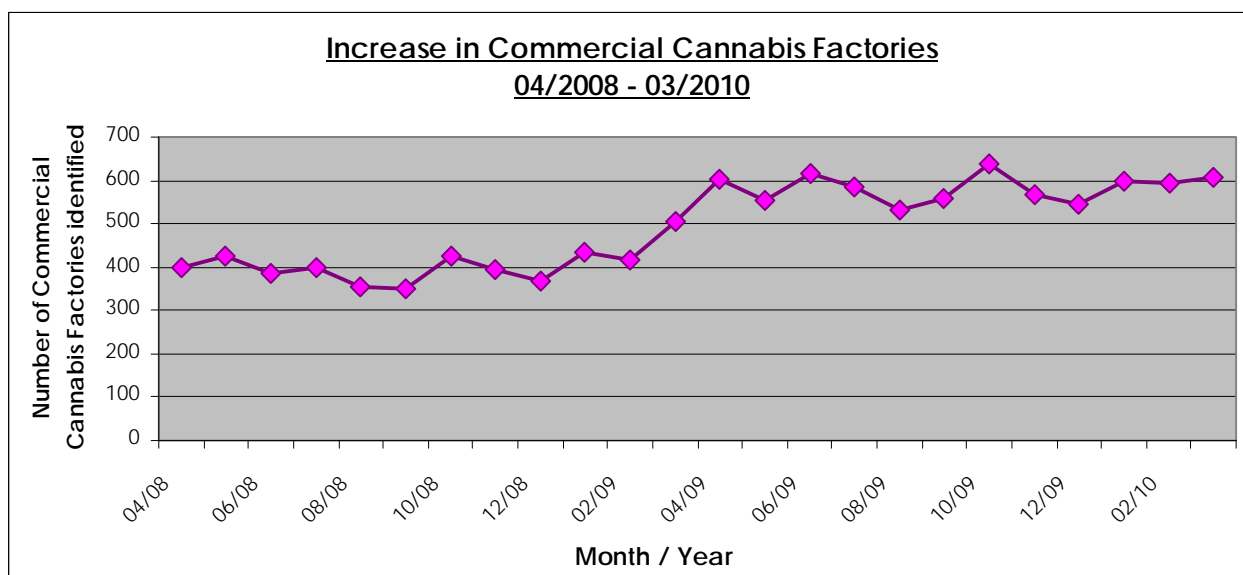
- The report encompasses information captured between April 2008 and March 2010.
- A self-report spreadsheet and intelligence questionnaire was administered to every police force and agency, ensuring a uniform return of all data.
- This paper does not cover generic cultivation or production of cannabis for personal use. The data collated for this report has been limited to the specific threat from large-scale, highly organised and sophisticated cannabis production operations by determined criminals.
- The geographical area covered is the United Kingdom, including England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Crime Trends

The National Baseline Assessment 2008 reported that during the financial year (FY) 2007/08 a total of 3,032 cannabis factories were identified. This figure has risen dramatically, more than doubling during this last two year period:

	FY 2007/08	FY 2008/09	FY 2009/10
Total number of commercial cannabis factories	3,032	4,951	6,866
Number of plants recovered	501,905	576,790	749,927
Number of Forces reporting	50	53	53
Average number of factories per month	252	413	572
Factories per 100,000 population	5	8	11

The graph below shows how the problem has escalated in recent years:








There are no noticeable peaks in the discovery of factories in any specific month. It is unlikely that organisers will choose to set up factories in any particular month or season, since the indoor production of cannabis is not driven by any external environmental factors.

The enhanced investigative focus by UK law enforcement has undoubtedly been a contributing factor in the steadily increasing discovery of factories, with proactive targeting of those responsible for the large scale production of cannabis.

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The police forces reporting the highest number of factories over the two year period are West Yorkshire Police, Greater Manchester Police, Metropolitan Police Service and West Midlands Police, all reporting significantly over 1,000 factories. However, they are amongst the largest police forces in the UK, so such high numbers are not unexpected.

In order to accurately assess which forces are suffering from the largest number of factories, crime and incident figures have been compared with the population of each force area.¹ These have been banded in line with the 2008 report in order to accurately compare yearly changes:

Key	Per 100,000 population
	16+
	12 – 15
	8 – 11
	4 – 7
	Less than 4

Using this colour code, the crime and incidents table and maps on the following pages clearly show the extent of the rise in cannabis factories for commercial cultivation. In 2007/08 only one force fell into the 16+ band, but seven forces have now reported more than 16 factories per 100,000 population.

¹ The last census for England and Wales was on 29 April 2001, therefore population figures have been collated using data from the 2008 mid-year estimates (Office for National Statistics)

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Force	Population	2007/08	2007/08 farms per 100k population	2008/09	2008/09 farms per 100k population	2009/10	2009/10 farms per 100k population	% change since 2007/08 ²
West Yorkshire	2,200,500	368	17	619	28	896	41	141
Greater Manchester	2,573,500	227	9	567	22	814	32	256
West Midlands	2,619,500	203	8	494	19	775	30	275
Avon & Somerset	1,591,900	207	13	350	22	402	25	92
Nottinghamshire	1,068,900	55	5	192	18	178	17	240
Merseyside	1,347,800	118	9	208	15	248	18	100
Warwickshire	530,700	48	9	61	11	81	15	67
Derbyshire	1,001,300	53	5	89	9	132	13	160
Essex	1,712,300	68	5	143	8	217	13	160
North Yorkshire	794,600	11	1	64	8	103	13	1200
South Yorkshire	1,305,900	54	5	140	11	119	9	80
Cambridgeshire	769,000	112	15	24	3	120	16	7
Lancashire	1,451,600	123	8	108	7	173	12	50
Sussex	1,548,000	37	2	135	9	156	10	400
Metropolitan	7,619,800	289	4	633	8	855	11	175
South Wales	1,241,000	73	6	94	8	115	9	50
Gwent	561,700	42	7	31	6	55	10	43
Northamptonshire	685,000	27	4	41	6	67	10	150
Hertfordshire	1,078,400	70	7	70	6	96	9	29
Gloucestershire	582,600	4	1	45	7	44	8	700
Leicestershire	979,700	75	8	67	7	66	7	-13
Thames Valley	2,042,500	110	5	95	5	172	8	60
Staffordshire	1,069,000	50	5	55	5	85	8	60
Bedfordshire	602,500	16	3	34	6	40	7	133
Dyfed Powys	509,900	41	8	24	5	35	7	-13
Northumbria	1,404,400	26	2	57	4	114	8	300

² Note: A high % increase is not necessarily an indication of a significant problem within that force. For instance, North Yorkshire has seen an increase of 1200% but does not experience a large number of factories in comparison to other forces, such as West Yorkshire.

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Norfolk	850,800	44	5	52	6	35	4	-20
Hampshire	1,860,700	37	2	65	3	122	7	250
Humberside	912,200	18	2	30	3	54	6	200
Lincolnshire	698,000	49	7	7	1	49	7	0
Cheshire	1,006,100	21	2	16	2	65	6	200
Surrey	1,268,800	12	1	36	3	48	4	300
Cleveland	562,100	43	8	5	1	26	5	-38
Cumbria	496,600	11	2	19	4	8	2	0
West Mercia	1,191,800	18	2	27	2	46	4	100
Strathclyde	2,213,200	30	1	71	3	34	2	100
North Wales	680,700	31	5	7	1	24	4	-20
Suffolk	715,700	22	3	12	2	19	3	0
Durham	609,000	7	1	6	1	22	4	300
Kent	1,660,100	73	4	20	1	57	3	-25
Wiltshire	648,400	14	2	10	2	15	2	0
Dorset	710,500	28	5	5	1	15	2	-60
Devon & Cornwall	1,675,800	19	1	14	1	11	1	0
Grampian	539,700	9	2	6	1	2	<1	N/A
Tayside	397,000	7	2	3	<1	2	<1	N/A
Dumfries & Galloway	148,600	No data	No data	0	<1	1	<1	N/A
Central Scotland	290,500	1	<1	1	<1	3	1	N/A
Fife	361,900	1	<1	1	<1	6	2	N/A
Lothian & Borders	930,300	4	<1	1	<1	26	3	N/A
PSNI	1,774,800	4	<1	80	5	8	<1	N/A
Northern	287,500	No data	No data	7	2	0	<1	N/A
BTP	N/A	8	N/A	10	N/A	12	N/A	N/A
UK Total	61,382,800	3,018³	5	4,951	8	6,866	11	

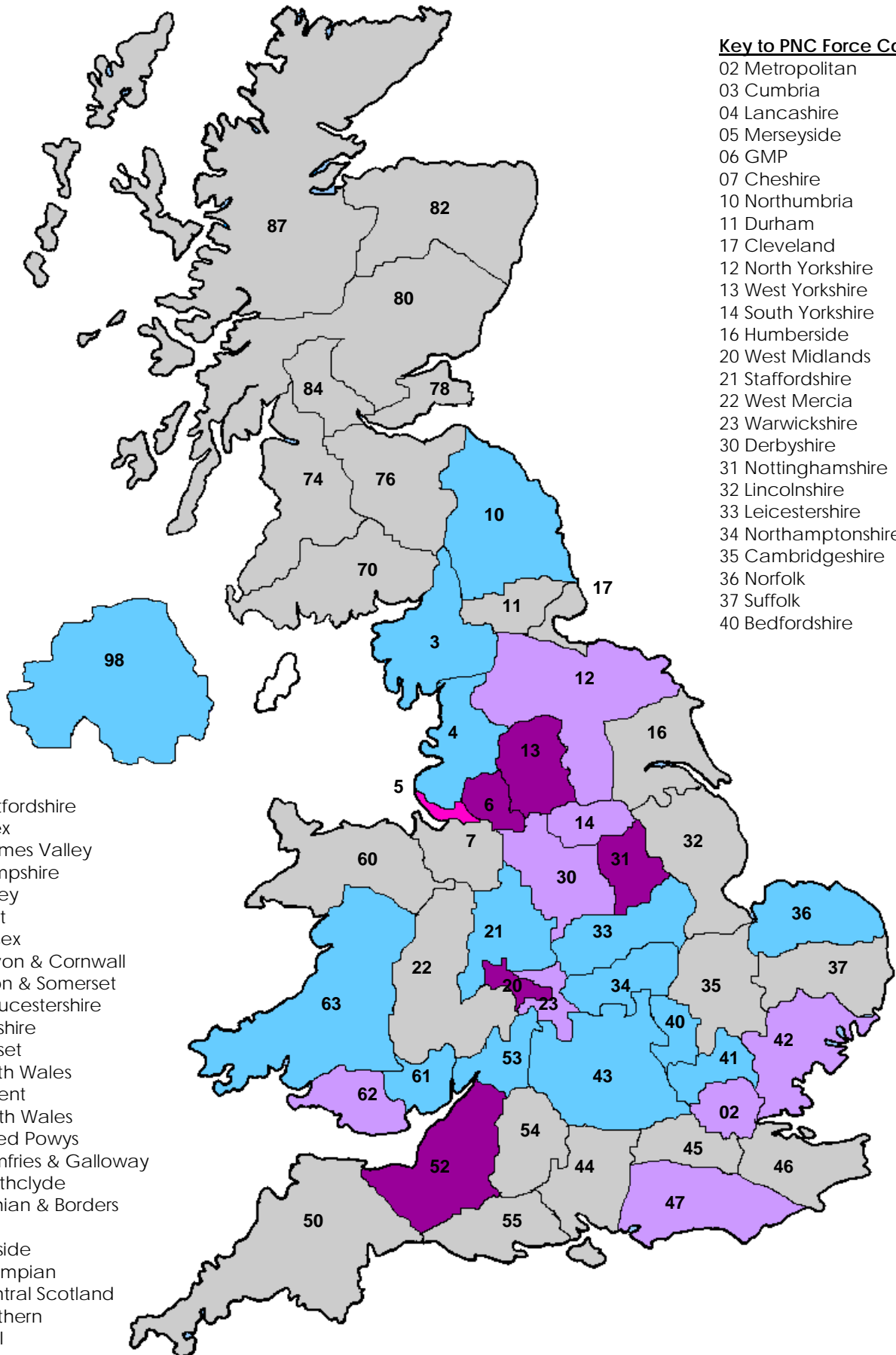
³ Raw data from the 2008 Baseline Assessment is not available to compare, therefore the number of recorded crimes has been used in this table. The actual figure was 3,032.

Commercial Cannabis Cultivations 2008/09

Key to PNC Force Codes

- 02 Metropolitan
- 03 Cumbria
- 04 Lancashire
- 05 Merseyside
- 06 GMP
- 07 Cheshire
- 10 Northumbria
- 11 Durham
- 17 Cleveland
- 12 North Yorkshire
- 13 West Yorkshire
- 14 South Yorkshire
- 16 Humberside
- 20 West Midlands
- 21 Staffordshire
- 22 West Mercia
- 23 Warwickshire
- 30 Derbyshire
- 31 Nottinghamshire
- 32 Lincolnshire
- 33 Leicestershire
- 34 Northamptonshire
- 35 Cambridgeshire
- 36 Norfolk
- 37 Suffolk
- 40 Bedfordshire

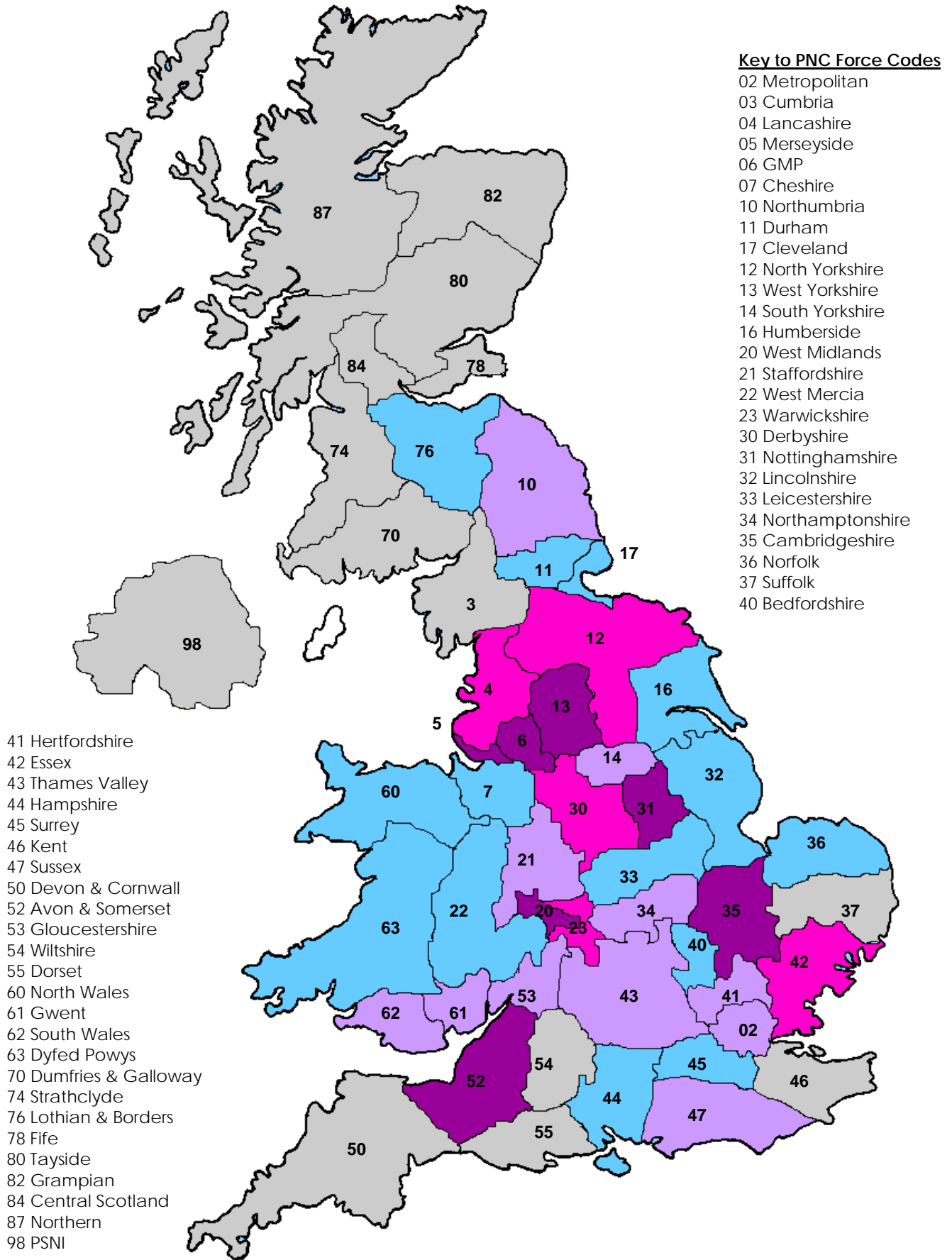
- 41 Hertfordshire
- 42 Essex
- 43 Thames Valley
- 44 Hampshire
- 45 Surrey
- 46 Kent
- 47 Sussex
- 50 Devon & Cornwall
- 52 Avon & Somerset
- 53 Gloucestershire
- 54 Wiltshire
- 55 Dorset
- 60 North Wales
- 61 Gwent
- 62 South Wales
- 63 Dyfed Powys
- 70 Dumfries & Galloway
- 74 Strathclyde
- 76 Lothian & Borders
- 78 Fife
- 80 Tayside
- 82 Grampian
- 84 Central Scotland
- 87 Northern
- 98 PSNI



Note: Each force is identifiable using its assigned PNC code.

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Commercial Cannabis Cultivations 2009/10



Identification of Factories

The reclassification of cannabis, in January 2009, generated increased public interest in the issue of domestic cannabis cultivation. In recent years the issue has been highlighted through the media in news articles and television programmes.

Many of the factories attended by police are the result of information provided by members of the community. Now, more than ever before, people are aware of the indications that a factory exists in the neighbourhood. They are responding to signs such as blacked out windows, hot walls, condensation, strange or pungent aromas and people or traffic activity at all hours. They are vigilantly reporting such occurrences to the police. During National Tackling Drugs Week 2009, Crimestoppers received 50 actionable calls about cannabis during the first three days alone.

Reports of burglaries in progress have also highlighted the existence of a factory, often due to rival gangs stealing the crop.

Several forces have reported the discovery of factories as a direct result of fires breaking out within the property, most likely due to tampering with the electric supply. Fires at cannabis cultivations have not been highlighted as a specific trend or issue by any force, therefore it is unlikely that they are a regular occurrence. The Fire Service is rarely required to attend factories in response to an actual fire, although they may assist the police in relation to fire safety advice, access to properties or flooding.

Property Type

Private dwellings remain the property of choice for large scale cannabis cultivation, accounting for the vast majority of all commercial cannabis factories identified during this two year period of analysis. Factories were also identified in industrial/commercial premises, agricultural premises, non dwellings, sheds/outhouses/garages and public/open places.

When comparing location data year on year, there is a noticeable decrease in the number of factories being discovered in dwellings, with an increase in those in agricultural and industrial/commercial premises.

The potential yield is the greatest incentive for criminals to set up cultivations in industrial premises. In July 2010, the largest recorded cannabis factory was discovered in Haddenham, Cambridgeshire. Over 7,600 plants were seized with an estimated value of £2.5 million.

The recession may also be a contributing factor, and there are currently a growing number of disused industrial and commercial buildings which are attracting criminals for the purposes of cannabis cultivation. Examples seen in the media in recent years include pubs, a cinema, nightclubs, hotels, banks and a print works. These buildings are often already boarded up and are therefore desirable to criminals.

Offender Profile & Crime Group Structure

To date, cannabis cultivation has been considered a 'South East Asian' crime. However, the report has highlighted the increased involvement of white British people. They are often associating with South East Asian people in the organisation and management of factories across multiple force boundaries.

The majority of offenders (58%) were aged between 18 and 35. Less than 2% were children, the majority of who were aged between 15 and 17. It is common for illegal immigrant suspects to lie about their age, claiming to be under 18 in order to frustrate the judicial process.

Although some reports did specifically refer to *young* children, there was no information to suggest that they had been left in the house alone to tend to the plants; they were essentially the children of adults linked to the factories.

Some children have been identified as being trafficked into the UK to work in cannabis farms, destined for all regional areas of the UK. Children had a number of roles within the cultivation chain, including diversion of electricity, crop maintenance and breaking and entering into rival cannabis farms. If they are recovered by authorities they are under extreme pressure to abscond from care, with organisers often making threats. A significant number go missing from local authority provided accommodation prior to or after exploitation.

Violence has been used in a number of cases, consisting of emotional and physical abuse. Threats to one child and his family members were also made. Children identified as victims of trafficking appear extremely wary of authorities and communicate little about their experiences in exploitation or about their captors. This may be because they are fearful for family members, as many will have unpaid debts, perhaps explaining their reasons for not disclosing information and going missing from care.

It is generally accepted that a high number of non-British individuals linked to cannabis cultivation are trafficked into the UK and subsequently put to work in factories across the UK. Those arrested when factories are raided by police are predominantly the 'gardeners', who are often Vietnamese or Chinese illegal immigrants.

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Illegal immigrants can pay up to £10,000 per person to be trafficked into the UK, and many have to pay their debt by working in premises used for the commercial-scale cultivation of cannabis. They are often left instructions in their own language by the organiser, explaining when to water the plants and how much fertiliser to use. They rarely, if ever, leave the property until the crop is harvested. Food and other necessities will be delivered to the premises.

Other nationalities identified as being involved in commercial cultivation in recent years include Polish, Asian and Japanese people.

Evidence has linked some people to multiple factories across the UK, suggesting that they are controlled by highly organised criminals with national connections.

It is believed that there are a number of small teams who specialise in specific aspects of the cultivation chain, all the way through from renting the property, purchasing the equipment, setting up the factories, cultivating the crop, running the drying areas, distributing the crop and transporting cash. This suggests that higher level criminals are coordinating these 'teams'.

The criminals responsible for the majority of commercial cultivations in the UK are highly organised. Targeted police action has successfully disrupted the criminal behaviour of a number of organised crime groups, and has set the bar for future operations.

Plants

Over 1.3 million plants (1,326,717) were recovered by UK law enforcement during this two year period, an estimated yield of £150 million⁵.

This equates to 576,790 plants in 2008/09 (an estimated yield of £65 million) and 749,927 in 2009/10 (an estimated yield of £85 million)

The largest factories were discovered in Cleveland, Grampian, Kent, Leicestershire, Merseyside, Metropolitan, South Yorkshire, Strathclyde and West Midlands Dyfed Powys, Essex, Greater Manchester, Gwent, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire and Strathclyde. Over 2,500 plants were recovered from some factories in these policing areas. Glasgow has been identified as a hotspot for the drying of cannabis.

The assumption has been made that due to the high frequency at which the UK is producing cannabis, there is now a market for exportation. However, there is no intelligence or evidence to suggest that this is happening. Data received from the United Kingdom Borders Agency (UKBA)

⁵ This figure is based on SOCA's street price estimate of £80 per 1 ounce of herbal cannabis.

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suggests that large amounts of cannabis are still being imported, indicating that the current demand for the drug is so great that domestic production cannot satisfy it. Although skunk cannabis is produced domestically in the UK there is still an appetite to import this variety as there is a perception by some criminals that UK produced skunk is of a lower quality than varieties available on the continent.



A drying area (photograph courtesy of Merseyside Police)

Associated Violence and Crime

Intelligence suggests that criminals involved in the cultivation of cannabis also have links to the production and distribution of most types and classes of drug, counterfeit currency, production and distribution of counterfeit DVDs and contraband tobacco, money laundering, immigration crime, firearms offences, prostitution, forgery, burglary, fraud and theft. There are also a number of 'bad on bad' crimes such as extortion, blackmail, kidnap, robbery and assault.

Some forces have reported incidents of cannabis factories being 'taxed' by other criminal groups. This had led to those within the factories arming themselves in response. A number of weapons have been recovered from cultivations, including machetes, firearms (specifically sawn off shotguns and handguns), knives, CS sprays, dangerous dogs, stun guns and wooden bats. There have also been some more discreet weapons discovered, including a mobile phone and a torch, both with electrodes on the top causing shock when in contact with skin.

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Violence is not only a feature of clashes between rival crime groups, it is also used to ensure compliance from those working within the factories.

Booby traps have also been discovered in some factories across the UK, although it does not appear that booby traps are as common as perceived. A very small number of crimes and incidents in this two year period reported the existence of a booby trap at the premises.

Law enforcement have witnessed attempts to electrify window frames and door knobs, a homemade device which would detonate a shot gun cartridge, and a window criss-crossed with bare wire attached to a standard three-pin plug.

Such measures are not only reserved for the doors and windows of a property. This image shows an external side gate at a factory which had been wired directly to the mains. Any person touching the handle or jumping over the gate could have been severely injured or killed.



An external booby trap (photograph courtesy of Northamptonshire Police)

Factory Equipment

There are a growing number of 'head shops'. These are retailers who sell, amongst other things, equipment necessary for the cultivation of cannabis. In addition to selling equipment to set up the factory, they often provide growing advice to would-be growers. These retailers operate on the high street and from industrial facilities. There are also countless websites operating as head shops on the internet.

Staff from high street shops have been known to contact the police if they consider a customer to be suspicious, and several forces are tapping into this resource through the production of

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information leaflets. Some OCG members are wise to this and will limit the purchases of this type of equipment to the same outlets that supply the growing equipment.

Some forces have received intelligence relating to specific outlets which supply equipment for the setting up of a cannabis factory, and in this two year period, several forces have carried out operations against head shop owners.

An example of this can be seen in a recent Hertfordshire case. Following targeted surveillance, police found cannabis factories at an industrial unit and a house in Milton Keynes. It also emerged that some of the plant pots in which the seedlings were grown were bought from a local Morrisons supermarket. The offenders, all British males, were convicted of conspiring to supply drugs and sentenced to a total of 17 years. This further supports intelligence suggesting that criminals are also purchasing equipment from high street retailers.