

PASSING A JOINT

York Region drug users prefer marijuana to get high

This is one in a regular series of features about the darker side of life in York Region.

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Staff Writer

Grass. Weed. Pot. Maryjane. Ghanja. Cannabis. Smoke. They all mean marijuana and it's still the drug of choice in York Region.

Despite growing fears about rave drugs, ecstasy and GHB (the date rape drug), that are gaining increased media attention in the city, they haven't hit York Region in a big way — yet, say police and substance abuse program officials.

"We still haven't seen an ecstasy seizure," Det. Kirk Dickson of the York Regional Police vice squad said. "It seems to be everywhere from what we hear in the press, but here, we haven't seen a lot. There aren't raves here compared to 8,000 people in the Better Living Centre at Exhibition park."

While the after-hours club the Drop Zone at Pacific Mall in Markham boasts all-night dancing and the same loud techno music popular at Toronto's raves, it doesn't have the reputation of the big-city clubs.

Det. Sgt. Mike Fleming said young people in York Region are still rocking at bush and field parties or at the Pit near Milne Park in Markham. They're drinking and smoking joints. Those joints were bought locally and, odds are, the marijuana was grown locally as well.

"The most prevalent thing across the region at the moment is people growing their own," Dickson said. "It's certainly the most common."

"The further you get from Toronto, the more marijuana there is — there's not as much cocaine or heroin in the north," said Det. Mike



ECONOMIST & SUN/TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

York Regional Police provincial weapons enforcement unit Const. Andre Crawford holds an AK-47, one of many weapons found during a May raid on a Loners clubhouse in Richmond Hill. Det. Richard Arnaud holds a slab of hashish. Marijuana and cocaine were also seized in that raid.

Klimm. The trouble is anyone can do it. People are growing it in farm fields, vacant lots and back yards across the region. For those with no access to land, a few thousand dollars worth of equipment and an empty room achieves the same goal and in record time.

Hydroponic labs use high-intensity grow lights and vitamin-

enhanced watering on a timer system. Indoors, day and night mean nothing as growers speed up the natural germination of the plants.

I still think cannabis is the most pervasive, most complex problem. It's a home-grown product and there are use problems, supply problems, production problems and enforcement problems.

For example, a small bedroom is big enough to start a 50-plant grow. The yield is about three ounces per plant and the time from germination to harvest can be as little as 52 days — a little more than two months.

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enhanced watering on a timer system. Indoors, day and night mean nothing as growers speed up the natural germination of the plants.

Each ounce is worth about \$300 on the street, Dickson said. Fifty plants, three ounces each at \$300 per ounce is about \$45,000 every 52 days. That's \$270,000 a year.

"With a rotating crop, like the bust in Markham (December 1998) where there were more than 100,000 plants, the money can be massive," said Dickson. "If you have a distribution network, you can be set up for life. Fines for possession or trafficking is just the cost of doing business."

As well, growers often up the potency because they control the grow. Back in the '60s, the THC level was about 2 per cent. Now, it's 18 or 19 per cent. It's a different drug now than it was then, Klimm said.

Brian Salmers, executive director of Addiction Services of York Region, says the agency works with about 1,500 residents a year. Of those, between 400 and 500 are given an assessment and referred to another program or given information they requested and are never heard from again.

At any given time, there may be up to 750 people actively participating in a variety of individual, group or family treatment services.

"Everyone is concerned about genetically modified food and that certainly applies to cannabis," Salmers he said.

"Cannabis continues to be the substance many youths experiment with because it continues to have a benign reputation, that you can't get into serious trouble."

"But it's the quality range and the enhanced potency that can be quite scary. Low levels have a fairly

Legalize or penalize?

Ask 100 people for their opinion on decriminalizing marijuana and you're likely to get 100 different answers for 100 different reasons.

A recent poll suggests two-thirds of Canadians favour the idea that possession of small amounts of pot should be non-criminal, punishable by fines, rather than jail time.

Former York Regional Police chief Julian Fantino and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police have called for decriminalizing marijuana, arguing the courts should be concentrating on more serious offences, not simple possession charges that often end up being discharged.

"Personally, I'm in favour of it," said vice squad Det. Kirk Dickson. "The government has no problem taxing alcohol and cigarettes. It's so prevalent, there's no way we will ever eradicate it. Growers are making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, so they go to court and pay a \$2,000 fine. It's the cost of doing business. No one will prosecute aggressively."

Det. Mike Klimm has a different perspective.

"It all starts with marijuana, no one starts with the hard drugs," he said. "Every day, we see a desensitizing of marijuana use. Either legalize or penalize."

"I support the concept of the (chief's association) resolution," said York Region police chief Robert Middaugh.

"What happens to the officer's right to search and seizure and arrest? What happens if it's decriminalized and there is no right for front line officers to search, to arrest, to seize? None of those questions have been answered and until I hear the answers I'm not prepared to go any farther than to say I support the concept."

— Kathleen Griffin

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