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“We change laws.”

Medical Marijuana Dispensaries and Their Effect on Crime

Opponents of medical marijuana sometimes speculate that medical marijuana dispensaries will lead to increased crime rates in surrounding areas.¹ These dispensaries, they claim, will attract thieves and robbers to the facilities and breed secondary crimes in surrounding areas. Such claims have prompted empirical and statistical analyses by researchers and law enforcement agencies. In what should not come as a surprise, given the robust security at most medical marijuana facilities, these studies have routinely shown that, contrary to popular opinion, dispensaries are not magnets for crime. Instead, these studies suggest that dispensaries are no more likely to attract crime than any other business, and in many cases, by bringing new business and economic activity to previously abandoned or run-down retail spaces, dispensaries actually contribute to a reduction in crime.

What follows is a brief summary of anecdotal and scientific evidence, including law enforcement data analyses and academic research on medical marijuana dispensaries and their effect on crime. For more information on dispensaries, medical use of marijuana, state laws, and other issues related to medical marijuana, please visit mpp.org/issues/medical-marijuana/.

2009 Los Angeles Police Department survey – In response to debate over medical marijuana regulations by the Los Angeles City Council, and outcry from medical marijuana opponents that dispensaries were magnets for crime, Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck asked his department to produce a report comparing the robbery rates of L.A. banks and medical marijuana dispensaries. The report indicated that there were 71 robbery reports filed with the LAPD at the city’s 350 banks. Despite there being far more medical marijuana dispensaries — more than 800 at the time according to Beck — there were fewer robbery reports filed at dispensaries; just 47.

When asked about the report, and claims that dispensaries are crime magnets, Beck said, “I have tried to verify that because, of course, that is the mantra. It really doesn’t bear out. ... Banks are more likely to get robbed than medical marijuana dispensaries.”²

2009 Denver Police Department survey – An analysis of robbery and burglary rates at medical marijuana dispensaries conducted by the Denver, Colorado Police Department at the request of the Denver City Council found that the robbery and burglary rates at dispensaries were lower than area banks and liquor stores and on par with those of pharmacies. Specifically, the report found a 16.8 percent burglary and robbery rate for

¹ “‘Across the state, we’re seeing an increase in crime related to dispensaries,’ said Ernie Martinez, a Denver police detective who is president of the Colorado Drug Investigators Association.” “Medical marijuana dispensaries’ effect on crime unclear,” *The Denver Post*, January 24, 2011.

http://www.denverpost.com/news/marijuana/ci_17178820#ixzz1ngbvMOII.

² “LAPD Chief: Pot clinics not plagued by crime,” *Los Angeles Daily News*, January 17, 2010.
http://www.dailynews.com/news/ci_14206441.

dispensaries, equal to that of pharmacies. That's lower than the 19.7 percent rate for liquor stores and the 33.7 percent rate for banks, the analysis found.³

2010 Denver Police Department analysis – In late 2010, the Denver Police Department looked at crime rates in areas in and around dispensaries. The analysis showed that through the first nine months of 2010, crime was down 8.2% relative to the same period in 2009. The decrease was comparable to the city's overall drop in crime of 8.8%.⁴ *The Denver Post* completed a similar analysis and found that crime rates in some areas with the highest concentration of dispensaries saw bigger decreases in crime than neighborhoods with no dispensaries.⁵

2010 Colorado Springs Police Department analysis – An analysis by the Colorado Springs Police Department found that robbery and burglary rates at area dispensaries were on par with those of other businesses. Specifically, the department's data indicated that there were 41 criminal incidents reported at the city's 175 medical marijuana businesses in the 18-month period ending August 31, 2010. Meanwhile, over that same period, there were 797 robberies and 4,825 burglaries at other city businesses. These findings led the department's spokesman, Sgt. Darrin Abbink, to comment, "I don't think the data really supports [dispensaries] are more likely to be targeted at this point."⁶

UCLA study, "Exploring the Ecological Link Between Crime and Medical Marijuana Dispensaries," October 2011 – In what is likely the most comprehensive analysis of the relationship, or lack thereof, between dispensaries and crime, researchers from UCLA, funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, used data from 95 census tracts in Sacramento to analyze two types of crime (violent and property) in areas with varying concentrations of dispensaries. What they found is that while factors traditionally understood to lead to increased crime — for example, large percentages of land zoned for commercial rather than residential use, a high percentage of one-person households, the presence of highway ramps, and a higher percentage of the population being ages 15-24 — were positively associated with crime in those areas, "the density of medical marijuana dispensaries was not associated with violent or property crime rates." In their conclusion, the researchers said, "[t]hese results suggest that the density of [medical marijuana dispensaries] may not be associated with increased crime rates or that measures dispensaries take to reduce crime (i.e., doormen, video cameras) may increase guardianship, such that it deters possible motivated offenders."⁷

Specifically, the study applied the "routine activity theory" of crime, which suggests that crime is more likely when three criteria are met: (1) a motivated offender, (2) a suitable target, as defined by factors like value, visibility, and access, and (3) a lack of guardianship such as low residency or poor security. The authors hypothesized that the

³ "Analysis: Denver pot shops' robbery rate lower than banks," *The Denver Post*, January 27, 2010. http://www.denverpost.com/ci_14275637.

⁴ See note 1, *supra*.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ "Marijuana shops not magnets for crime, police say," *Fort Collins Gazette*, September 14, 2010. <http://www.gazette.com/articles/wall-104598-marijuana-brassfield.html>.

⁷ <http://www.uclamedicalmarijuanaresearch.com/node/10>.

lack of a relationship between dispensaries and crime could be attributable to either of two possible conclusions: either medical marijuana dispensaries were no more valuable a target than other businesses in the area — a possibility supported by the law enforcement surveys in L.A. and Denver discussed above — or heightened security at dispensaries was sufficient to deter criminal activity in the area.

Regent University study, June 2011 – Researcher Maura Scherrer of Regent University looked at the perception of crime, and medical marijuana dispensaries’ impact on crime, among residents of Denver neighborhoods with varying socio-economic profiles. In so doing, she found that most crimes, including robbery, vandalism, and disorderly conduct increased in Denver from 2008 to 2009. However, in areas within 1,000 feet of a dispensary, rates were down for most types of crime, including burglary, larceny, and a 37.5% reduction in disorderly conduct citations. In her conclusion the author notes, “it appears that crime around the medical marijuana centers is considerably lower than citywide crime rates; a much different depiction than originally perceived.”⁸

⁸ Study available at <http://adr.coalliance.org/codr/fez/view/codr:983>.