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**Propagating the Haze? Community and professional perceptions of cannabis  
cultivation and the impacts of prohibition**

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## Abstract

Recent decades have seen substantial changes in the UK cannabis landscape, including increased domestic production, the ascendancy of stronger strains (namely 'skunk') and the drug's re-reclassification under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act. Resultantly, cannabis retains significance in the consciousness, priorities and policy agendas of communities, drug services and criminal justice agencies. This paper presents an empirical study, which examined both perceptions and impacts of cannabis cultivation and its control within a North-West English borough. Drawing on qualitative research with professionals, practitioners, resident groups, cannabis users, cannabis users' families and cannabis cultivators themselves, the findings suggest that cannabis cultivation was not a uniformly familiar concept to respondents, who had limited knowledge and experience of its production. Across all participant groups, the transmission of accurate information was lacking, with individuals instead drawing on the reductionist drug discourse (Taylor, 2016) to fill knowledge deficits. Consequently, some participants conflated cannabis cultivation with wider prohibitionist constructions of drug markets, resulting in the diffusion of misinformation and an amplification of anxieties. In contrast, other participants construed cultivation as making economic sense during austerity, justifying such tolerance through inverse adherence to the same narrow socio-cultural construction of drugs i.e. that cultivation carried comparatively less harms than *real* drug markets. Enforcement mechanisms also drew on generic prohibitionist conceptions, assuming cultivators to be unconstrained, autonomous actors in need of punishment; a belief which lacked nuanced understanding of the local terrain where vulnerable individuals cultivating under duress played a key role in the supply chain. The paper concludes with a call for the provision of accessible information/education; the need to challenge and reconceptualise the assumed autonomy and resultant punity directed at *all* cultivators; and a subsequent need to reassess established forms of legal (and increasingly social) enforcement.

## **Keywords**

Cannabis cultivation; drug policy; prohibition; drug harms; reductionist discourse; vulnerability.

## Introduction: The cannabis cultivation terrain

There has been a general decline in the use of cannabis over the last two decades, yet it remains the most commonly used illegal drug in England and Wales (Home Office, 2016). Recent years have seen changes to the landscape of the UK cannabis market in relation to both the nature of the product and means of production. Whilst attention has been paid to cannabis *users* during this period (for example Foster and Spencer 2013), there has been little consideration of those who *cultivate* the drug. There have been some surveys of UK cultivators (see Potter et al., 2015; Lenton et al., 2015), yet a dearth of qualitative, face-to-face studies which contextualise cannabis cultivation on a community level (although see Ancrum and Treadwell, 2016). The current research contributes to a rebalancing of these disparities.

The form of cannabis used in the UK has shifted with a decline in cannabis ‘resin’ and increased use of sinsemilla (intensively farmed herbal cannabis, commonly known as ‘skunk’) (Pakes and Silverstone, 2012, Hardwick and King, 2008). The shift towards skunk represents an increase in *average* strength (McLaren et al., 2008) which, fortified by media augmentation (Forsyth, 2005), has given rise to social disquiet and increased politicisation of drug policy agendas (Silverman, 2012). According to Forsyth (2005) this is due to skunk being portrayed as a new drug (or indeed ‘threat’) despite the fact ‘the *strongest* varieties available are no stronger than the strongest varieties available in previous decades’ (Potter, 2008: 96, emphasis added). Consequentially, the ‘emergence’ of skunk fits the perpetual cycle of drug scares (Forsyth, 2012) whereby ‘new’ drugs are greeted by media misrepresentations, enhanced public concern and political reinforcement of prohibitionist control (Taylor, 2016).

Cannabis production has undergone two principal changes. Firstly, the UK market, once dominated by imports, is now estimated to domestically produce between 50-80% of all cannabis consumed on its shores (ACPO, 2012, Potter, 2010). This reflects a common global change to self-sufficient cannabis production, particularly across developed nations (Decorte and Potter, 2015). Secondly, there has been a shift in the type of cultivation, from large-scale commercial production in industrial property to a 'franchising' model using smaller residential or domestic premises (Kirby and Peal, 2015) in order to reduce both legal (detection and prosecution) risks and the potential for illegal 'taxing' (theft) of crops. Notably, the latter is increasingly reported as a means by which local individuals can be controlled through debt bondage by the dealers for whom they produce the crop (ACPO, 2012), to the extent that the phenomenon is being described by Police Chiefs as 'modern slavery' (NPCC, 2014) with specific association with organised criminal gangs (Silverstone, 2011).

The policing of cannabis cultivation in the UK has historically been wrought by the local discretion of individual police forces, with resources predicting the likelihood of targeting cannabis cultivators (Pakes and Silverstone, 2012). Indeed, in the context of reduced policing budgets many forces have followed advice from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO, 2012) and deprioritised cannabis cultivation (Gayle, 2015). Furthermore, whilst the 2008 drugs strategy for England and Wales specifically commented on the need to 'work together to combat the significant threat' of 'cannabis factories' (HM Government, 2008: 18), the issue of cultivation was noticeably absent from the most recent strategy (HM Government, 2010). Resultantly, figures on seizures may reflect changing enforcement levels and localised police procedure rather than trends in actual growing (O'Hagan and Parker, 2016) meaning that they are unable to provide an accurate reflection of contemporary cannabis cultivation, emphasising the need for further empirical investigation.

These changes to the cannabis market and its policing have had significant impacts, both on those involved in the drug's production and the communities around them. Ancrum and Treadwell (2016: 70) emphasise the need to move beyond generic understandings of cannabis cultivation, as '...it is now perfectly clear that a range of quite specific local dynamics shape the organisation of illicit markets across the country, and especially in those parts of the city populated by the post-industrial working class.'

This article responds to this challenge by documenting the contemporary cannabis cultivation landscape within an urban borough (hereafter Thornbridge for anonymity purposes) in the North West of England; an area where cannabis cultivation was reported (by the media and Local Authority) to be occurring at disproportionately high levels. Thornbridge is one borough making up a wider metropolitan area, ranks as one of the most deprived areas in the UK, has an unemployment rate double that of the national average and is amongst the areas most heavily impacted upon by welfare reforms implemented during austerity<sup>1</sup>.

The research objective was to build a coherent picture of the knowledge, perceptions and wider impacts of cannabis cultivation on the local communities and service providers in the area. The article concludes that most lay community members and professionals lacked knowledge around the practical, legal, social, health, behavioural and service provision implications of the changing cultivation terrain, which led to them filling gaps in knowledge by drawing on normative reductionist constructions of drugs (Taylor, 2016). As such, 'knowledge' was constructed from populist prohibitionist conceptualisations rather than a factual evidence base (Taylor et al., 2016). Resultantly, for some in Thornbridge, conceived threats to wellbeing

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<sup>1</sup> Direct references to relevant publications are not possible here as this would breach anonymity protocols.

were grounded in generic (mis)representations of drug related harms (Buchanan, 2015) instead of the actual implications of changes in the local cannabis cultivation landscape.

Interestingly, however, other participants offered contrasting evidence of an *acceptance* of localised cultivation, exactly because it did *not* fit within normative stereotypical conceptualisations of drug markets i.e. that cultivation was comparatively less harmful than *other* illegal drug markets and involved non-stereotypical actors who did not adhere to dominant caricatures of those involved in the illegal drug trade (Taylor, 2008). Cultivation so construed was justifiable in an area characterised by financial hardship, containing few opportunities for legitimate employment.

Such themes indicate that dominant prohibitionist drug rhetoric influences community constructions of drug issues. This then has real consequences (as identified shortly) for those localities, demonstrating a need to challenge the normative prohibitionist myths of illegal drug markets and to differentiate these from reality (Brownstein, 2013).

### **Reducing the Harm of Prohibitionist Cannabis Cultivation Policy: A review of the evidence and capacity for change**

There is evidence that prohibitionist drug policies increase rather than mitigate drug related harms (Buchanan, 2015; Rolles and Murkin, 2014), with the pro-active policing of drug markets exemplifying the exacerbation of existing social problems (Kerr et al., 2005). The trend towards small-scale cannabis cultivation sites in the UK, prompted and sustained by attempts to police



cannabis importation and production (O'Hagan and Parker, 2015), provides further evidence of this. Cultivation has resultantly become more difficult to detect, the numbers involved (and therefore open to criminalisation) have increased and the issue of "taxing" (stealing) of crops and resultant debt bondage has emerged (ACPO, 2012: 3).

In order to alleviate the harms caused by the prohibitionist control of cultivation, a number of researchers have urged drug policy reform. Paoli et al. (2015), drawing on research from Belgium, indicate that limited harms would be generated through the quelling of criminalisation for cultivation, and argue that since most existing harms are 'generated by large-scale growers' (: 277), policy should aim to disrupt this element of the market. Hough et al. (2003) propose treating small-scale home cultivation as a variant of possession in the UK to allow cannabis users to grow their own to 'destabilise this criminalised distribution system,' meaning that '[w]ith a reduced return on investment in cannabis, criminal entrepreneurs might abandon the market' (ibid.: x). Nguyen et al. (2015) found in the US that deterrence did not effect desistance but that growers tempered the size of their growing in response to policy. The authors extrapolate from this that legal plant limits could reduce the levels of commercial scale suppliers (ibid.). Decorte (2010: 275) adds further support to this by contending that such progressive policy 'can lead to a structure of the sector that offers few possibilities for 'organized crime,' which simultaneously makes the trade less attractive to criminal entrepreneurs motivated by financial incentives (Ancrum and Treawell, 2016).

Policy-makers seemingly assume there is no scope for suppressing prohibitionist policies due to agreed conventions across the EU, which are guided by the UN Drug Control Treaties of 1961, 1971 and 1988. However, beliefs that the conventions mandate prohibitionist or indeed punitive responses, or that they preclude amendments to the law, policy and policing of

cannabis, are unfounded. The UN Control Treaties mandate only that action is taken with regard to drug related acts (including production), meaning that penal responses are by no means the only recourse available, as ‘... there is express provision for imposing measures such as treatment, education, rehabilitation or social reintegration... either in addition or, more importantly, as an alternative to conviction or punishment’ (Runciman, 2000: 3).

Countries who recognised the flexibility of the UN Treaties by moderating their drug laws have found significant reductions in drug related harms. Evidence from the Netherlands, Portugal and the USA indicate that differential policies towards cannabis possession and use have resulted in reduced rates of criminalisation, savings in public expenditure and positive public health outcomes (MacCoun and Reuter, 2011; Hughes and Stevens 2010; Drug Policy Alliance, 2015). Such outcomes become especially apparent where policies allow for pragmatic humanitarian responses via social, education and harm prevention measures which offer users treatment and reintegration rather than prison and exclusion (Domosławski, 2011). Simultaneously there is emerging evidence from the Spanish ‘social-club’ system that the decriminalisation of cannabis *production* and *distribution* can also address extant problems and reduce drug-related harms (Murkin, 2015), and Uruguay has begun a similar journey with its recent government approval of domestic cultivation and cannabis clubs (Eastwood et al., 2016).

The drug policy paradigm shifts in these countries demonstrate the potential for legislative change, providing evidence for both the abolition of prohibitionist, punitive policy and the extension of education, treatment and reintegration. The dismantling of prohibition, when accompanied by an increased focus on health and education, can reduce the spectrum of drug related harms; simultaneously extending personal freedoms and decreasing public expenditure. These lessons are crucial to areas like Thornbridge which are experiencing

considerable harms in relation to cannabis cultivation – harms which are perpetuated more by prohibitionist policy than the production of the drug itself.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative mixed methods approach was adopted to meet three criteria. Firstly to grasp the full range of complex issues surrounding cannabis cultivation; secondly to recognise the sensitivity of the topic; and thirdly to meet the needs of the diverse range of participant groups<sup>2</sup>.

Professionals and stakeholders (including probation, prison and police officers, housing personnel, drug services, young people's services, council workers, NHS staff, social care, Citizens Advice Bureau, Stronger Families, mental health teams (youth and adult) and Young Advisors) working with and around cannabis use and cultivation were involved in a World Café research event which encompassed twenty-five focus groups. The World Café method employs café style tables at which small groups sit with a facilitator to discuss a specific issue for a short period. Groups then move to the next thematic table to discuss a new issue, taking with them the new knowledge and understandings they developed in the previous group. This technique provides fertile ground for group learning and collective sharing of experiences (Brown and Isaacs, 2005). Informed by a previous Local Authority needs analysis, the professional and stakeholder groups were asked to discuss their knowledge about the changing cannabis terrain, its impacts in the community and the availability of service provision

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<sup>2</sup> See *Figure 1* below for sample sizes.

for cannabis (particularly skunk) users and cultivators in Thornbridge. Their responses were triangulated to establish common themes.

Community members took part in focus groups in their local community centres. This local context and absence of professional bodies provided community participants with the support of fellow residents, which stimulated lively, candid discussion around cannabis cultivation. Like the professionals, they were asked about their knowledge of the changing cannabis terrain and its impacts, with additional questions about the community's *perceptions* of cannabis. The aim was to understand the tolerance levels of local communities with regard to use and cultivation. The professionals who referred the (grand)mothers of cannabis users emphasised that many felt shame, guilt and sadness around the impacts of their (grand)child's use, so an individualised method was selected for these participants. Similarly, cannabis users and in particular the cultivators were asked to discuss their personal and legal histories, the sensitivity of which required a one-to-one method. In view of this, the family, user and cultivator data collection all took the form of semi-structured interviews. Attempts were made through local professionals to identify and access local cultivators in the community, but this proved unfeasible in light of the concealed nature of production in a prohibitionist environment. However, access to local growers was achieved when a local prison governor granted access to those convicted for cultivation, and a number of them agreed to participate.

*Figure 1 to be inserted here*

## **Findings**

The following sections outline the contemporary cannabis terrain in Thornbridge by triangulating data on the knowledge and impacts, particularly of skunk, from all participant groups. As the research was a scoping exercise, an inductive approach was taken, with key themes and patterns identified using the most commonly raised issues in the World Café, individual interviews and focus groups.

### ***Knowledge of Cannabis Cultivation***

Notably, the majority of community participants had little direct knowledge or experience of cannabis cultivation generally or specifically within their communities; most were unaware of it unless it was reported in the local media. Only a small minority reported personal experience. Equally, for many professionals, knowledge was not direct but gained through conversation with colleagues, often in other agencies. Professionals resultantly identified information needs around the shift towards stronger strains of cannabis in terms of clarifying the law, advice on identifying and reporting cultivation, and harm prevention/minimisation information with regard to the (mis)use of electricity, debt risks, fumes, exploitation and social repercussions.

‘Over the last number of years, cannabis has changed quite a lot. And the impact of cannabis has changed in [Thornbridge]. But actually in general I’m not sure that we’ve all caught up with that either, professionally, service wise, or in the community’  
(Professional, World Cafe).

For the community and professional groups, hypothetical ‘knowledge’ resulted from a lack of direct experience or access to contemporary research findings. This was evidenced by

instances of commonly transmitted stories and inaccuracies around cultivation. For example, a number of professionals suggested that skunk was produced through a process of adulteration with Class A drugs.

‘Some of them [cultivators] are now [using other drugs] inevitably. Because of the way it’s now cultivated...the water and irrigation system has got heroin in it which will then bring the plant on. Makes it into superskunk and it’s more addictive because it contains heroin’ (Professional, World Café).

The scenario seems unlikely because it is cost-inefficient and, even were it genetically possible, may produce withdrawal in cannabis users, yet no such reports came from the users or professionals working directly with these groups. This is supported by research which found that 96.1% of seized cannabis samples were indeed simply cannabis (Hardwick and King, 2008). Cultivators confirmed that adulteration with class A drugs would be ‘bad for business’ i.e. self-cancelling, as people would not buy from a dealer who failed to provide them with the product they intended to purchase, particularly something which caused withdrawal. This was illustrated by two cultivators who reported sand and fibreglass being added to bags of cheap imported cannabis some years previously. They explained that shaking the bag decanted the adulterants to the bottom, resulting in an escalation in complaints to dealers. Dealers refused to buy from that supplier again meaning that, within a few weeks, the adulterated cannabis left the market and did not return.

Interestingly, a number of respondents linked this contemporary skunk production with the heroin epidemic previously experienced in Thornbridge, conflating the example of adulterated

skunk with heroin dealer's previous attempts to get users 'hooked'. This appears to demonstrate how a lack of accessible, reliable information results in individuals filling in knowledge gaps by referring to dominant historical constructions. This conflation is a key characteristic of the reductionist drugs discourse, which through a narrow focus on specific drugs and certain drug markets generically frames *all* drugs as harmful and *all* drug markets as seeking to enslave users in addiction (Taylor et al., 2016). Such conceptualisations enable myth to be accepted as reality (Saper, 1974) whilst concurrently providing an indisputable justification for the continuation of drug prohibition (Taylor, 2008).

In spite of such evidence to the contrary, there was an observable transmission of inaccuracies about cultivation between and across agencies, with some issues and stories gaining momentum as the World Cafe progressed. It would appear that the risk of this transmission process, in the context of a lack of informed knowledge, left both professionals and the community vulnerable to contradictory or incorrect information, which escalated fears and was reported by many professionals to make it difficult to respond appropriately to the needs of their service users.

### ***Service and Education Needs***

Apart from those working in an enforcement capacity (namely police and housing staff, who had most direct experience of cultivation), the majority of professionals identified a need for information around skunk cultivation, both for themselves and to offer to their service users.

'I've got to be honest...until today I knew nothing about the cultivation side of it. So you've got to educate professionals before they can actually move on and take things forward' (Professional, World Café).

'Professionals and the different age groups in the community, young people, adults, need that awareness. Easy access to who they can contact for help... Demystify the harm, the effects and the consequences' (Professional, World Café).

A previous police-lead drop-in service providing cannabis information was recalled by some professionals, but this initiative was the only extant education provision identified and had only been a short-term project. There was also concern that holistic education around cannabis cultivation required broad consideration of social, health and legal impacts, not all of which are the remit or specialism of the police.

Some professionals suggested that in terms of service provision, responses to cultivation were currently the remit principally of those who police (in the broadest sense) cultivation, namely the police and housing professionals. Many professionals said there were no services that worked specifically with cultivators, and particularly not in a confidential manner to attract those afraid of legal and social enforcement action. Others said the opposite; that there were a range of services from debt to employment to housing support and drug workers. Some of these contradictions stemmed from a lack of specific provision, but much was due to a lack of advertising and signposting. A number of focus groups therefore suggested that professionals needed an accurate idea of the scale of cultivation in Thornbridge as well as a clear, coordinated strategic map of what the responses should be.



A number of professionals suggested that cannabis cultivation was perhaps deliberately unspoken in public forums to conceal the issue. They suggested that the need to market and promote Thornbridge as a 'Borough of Choice' sometimes eclipsed the need to deal realistically with social problems. These issues illustrate how the social construction of drugs and the powerful rhetoric of a prohibitionist discourse can actively inhibit efforts to address drug related harms (Taylor et al., 2016). In a bid to avoid being stigmatised as having a 'drug problem' (Taylor, 2008) Thornbridge demonstrated a reluctance to pro-actively address an issue which sits outside the narrow parameters of normative drug policy (Taylor, 2011).

### ***Perceptions of Cultivation***

None of the participant groups knew the exact incidence of cultivation as, for many, growing (of anything more than a couple of plants) was outside their direct experience. As in the previous section on knowledge, this is an interesting finding in light of the media and Local Authority reporting that cultivation was so prevalent in Thornbridge<sup>3</sup>. Most only knew that cultivation existed in their geographical area because of local media focus on recent police activity. Knowledge, therefore, was formulated through media representations of cultivation and policing rather than direct experience. At a time when we are experiencing a 're-definition of the 'cannabis problem'' (Acevedo, 2007: 117) and media representations mirror those of political rhetoric and policy documentation (Taylor, 2008), prohibitionist themes around the nature of drug use and markets predominate. Residents relying on local media as an information source were presented with cultivation as an organised, dangerous phenomena fitting with wider conceptualisations of the drug trade. In reality the situation was much more nuanced, yet this process of stereotyping fits comfortably with wider drugs war propaganda;

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<sup>3</sup> Direct references to these articles are not possible here as this would breach anonymity protocols.

meaning that conceptualisations apparently based on common sense are actually founded in fallacy (Taylor et al., 2016). Interestingly, moving beyond stereotypical notions presents a contradictory universality (Brownstein, 2013) which sit in explicit juxtaposition to normative representations.

The demographic profile of cultivators was largely unknown by the community and professionals, but there was a common perception across all participant groups that whilst cultivation happened in *all* socio-economic groups it was *most likely* to be attractive to those struggling to find employment and income in the mainstream labour market, and those with what was perceived as 'less to lose,' (the unemployed, young males and those without dependents). Despite this belief, a dichotomy was evident between those construed as growing for 'greed' as opposed to 'need' (Potter, 2010): The former perceived as autonomous actors who actively made the decision to enter the lucrative drug market; The latter as vulnerable individuals whose perilous economic position left them open to exploitation. These perceptions are notable in terms of acknowledging the range of motivations for cultivation. This was demonstrated by the diversity of cultivator participants, who ranged in age, with some initially working whilst cultivating, whilst others were unemployed.

### ***Motivation for Cultivation***

Existing research indicates a broad spectrum of typologies amongst cannabis cultivators (Hough et al., 2003; Potter et al., 2015). In Thornbridge, however, there appeared a narrower range of cultivator typologies, with the majority's involvement determined by their socio-economic circumstances. Three cultivator typologies were identified across all participant groups; people who grew it in their home, primarily for their own use; those who voluntarily

grew crops for a dealer due to the financial incentives; and people who were coerced into growing for a dealer (usually because of financial reasons). Whilst professionals and community groups acknowledged that small numbers fitted the first typology, little was known about them as by definition they failed to come to the attention of the public/services. The latter two typologies, however, were considered more prominent, with greater inferences for the wider community.

Professionals and cultivators in particular agreed that cultivation was driven principally by financial and structural/economic conditions, thriving as a cottage industry in which some improved their lifestyle, using it as a source of employment and income in a stagnant economy, fitting with Ancrum and Treadwell's (2016) identification of criminal entrepreneurs who are motivated by financial gain:

'It's a way of getting a lot of money very very quickly. Once you get good at it, three crops a year's not a problem. Forty thousand pounds for someone who's never had a job! (Professional, World Café).

A distinction was made, however, between those who voluntarily cultivate to *alleviate* their socio-economic position and those who are exploited *because* of their socio-economic position. This final typology were considered to cultivate due to increasing levels of coercion and were perceived as both vulnerable and at risk due to the criminal nature of the market:

'[Y]ou have like a drug dealer...who will pay people to well, it's called just like 'sitting on it'...and they're paying for a lot of their rent or they're giving them a lot of money so you've got a person who's just got to have this thing going in the loft and this fella's just paying his leccy [electricity] bill and throwing loads of money at him...and if he gets caught, he [the dealer] won't get it [prosecuted] will he?...The top dog won't get done and then he'll just find some other mug to do it for him... the people who have got it in their houses are little muppets who can't fight for themselves and won't do nothing' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

These latter two contrasting typologies construct the drugs market as comprising autonomous actors motivated by money who warrant punishment, juxtaposed by exploited, vulnerable individuals in need of protection. Notably, only the former mirrors normative justifications for prohibitionist control (Taylor et al., 2016).

'Problem I have is when they have £1million worth of grass in their room. They don't need to do that. They do it because of greed. Now the boy on the street is just trying to live' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

The autonomous group were seen as fitting the stereotypical drug actor mould (Taylor, 2008) whilst the coerced group were perceived as *victims* of the illegal drug market. Importantly, the two groups were identified by *different* elements of the sample (as discussed below) who were distinguished by their levels of knowledge/experience of cultivation.

## ***Reporting and Tolerance of Cultivation***

Two distinct and contrasting responses to cultivation emerged through the community focus groups, with residents communicating either acceptance of cultivation, or concern at its occurrence. A number of interlinking factors motivated residents to accept cultivation as a legitimate means of income. A key theme was sympathy towards those with few legitimate employment prospects, who were construed as financially vulnerable and therefore susceptible to exploitation. Moreover, the social deprived status of Thornbridge inhabitants led to an understanding of their involvement in cultivation.

‘The majority of people now are growing it to get above water aren’t they?’ (Community Participant, Focus Group).

Such views were coupled with a neoliberal ambivalence of cultivation as long as it did not affect others in the community.

‘It doesn’t bother me one bit...that’s sort of shoved away, it’s not in your face’ (Community Participant, Focus Group).

Additionally, residents construed cultivation as comparatively ‘less criminal’ than other illicit behaviour or illegal drug markets.

'I look at them sort of people and think good on you, you're not going out robbing old people, you aren't robbing houses... and to me, they're doing no harm' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

'I don't see pot as being anything big or major. They don't make the money off weed that they do off cocaine and smack [heroin]' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

Acceptance of cultivation conflicts with the argument that normative and generic representations of drugs predominate the public conscience. Such attitudes, however, appear to be formulated through direct experiences of cultivation and therefore avoid a reliance on the dominant drugs discourse to fill knowledge gaps. Seeing those involved in the trade: as victims of circumstance (rather than faceless actors in the violent drug trade); as keeping themselves to themselves (rather than flooding communities with drugs and drug-related crime); and as representing less of a comparative problem/risk than other illegal drug actors (as they appear significantly less dangerous and 'big league' than those involved in the heroin and cocaine markets which predominate the public conscience). This departure from the normative themes associated with dominant representations of the 'drug problem' indicates that when people possess nuanced knowledge, they are able to prise themselves away from normative constructions. This ability to autonomously conceptualise the drug trade had real-life implications with less evident fears and anxieties expressed amongst this group.

The second group of residents who expressed *concern* about cultivation reinforced this knowledge deficit process through their adherence to normative notions. They were characterised as having little direct knowledge of cultivation and conflated its occurrence with

other aspects of the drug trade, such as the prospect of large numbers of unknown people entering their neighbourhood seeking out cultivators' houses, or other anti-social issues such as cultivation odours or excessive parking on their street.

'The anti-socialness of people coming and going, puts them [residents] at risk of low-lives [sic] who may be violent' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

'I'd be less tolerant if someone was living next door to me and they were doing it cos I would not want people coming up and down my road and I would not want my children involved in that' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

Professionals felt that these community anxieties were produced by concerns about anti-social behaviour, organised crime and the generic dealing of drugs, not by cultivation per se. This distinction is an important one as in most cases dealers and cultivators are separate individuals with different impacts on the community, the latter being less likely to cause neighbourhood problems for fear of detection. The misapprehension left this group of community participants with the reductionist view that *all* cultivators were highly organised, well-connected, dangerous criminals, resulting in them failing to report cultivation through fear of reprisals. Such views supported the construction of cultivators as autonomous actors for whom punitive responses were justifiable, yet such policies clearly risked simultaneously punishing those being exploited.

### ***Impacts of Cultivation and its Prohibition***

### *Compounding Social Problems*

Exploitation and debt bondage were significant concerns for professionals due to the vulnerability of those cultivating for other people. There were particular anxieties that young people, or indeed their parents and families might become involved in cultivation because they had been coerced or exploited and that this could escalate extant social problems such as debt. A drug worker and a debt counsellor reported dealers pressuring individuals into growing for them to pay off debt (and in some instances falsely increasing that debt by later stealing the same crops they had coerced them in to growing). The illegality of cannabis cultivation compounded such phenomenon, by precluding those being exploited from accessing services for support.

'I think it makes vulnerable people even more vulnerable. It puts them on the streets. If you have a learning difficulty or are vulnerable because of previous mental health, or anything really, you're a prime target for these kids. Cos if they can get in your house and near your leccy [electric] meter, they can grow their cannabis and what are you going to do? Who are you going to tell?' (Professionals, World Café).

Professionals were concerned about the impacts of the broader social policing of cultivation in terms of the risk of losing tenancies, losing electricity meters through theft of electricity which are expensive to have reinstalled (raising the risk of debt) and the difficulties of being rehoused following a cultivation conviction or housing enforcement action. Escalating social problems were also identified at the community level in that professionals felt that the linking of cannabis cultivation within a specific geographical location could have negative implications for its reputation linking to the earlier point of prohibitionist policies and stigmatisation restricting practices which mitigate drug-related



harms. Most agreed that this geographical 'spoiled identity' or 'postcode labelling' was particularly observable in Thornbridge.

A number of professionals raised concerns about the impact of cultivation on parents, particularly lone parents, who became involved in cultivation for dealers through debt, but developed greater problems as a result in terms of safety, child protection and criminal justice. Equally there were concerns for the children of cultivators, regarding risks emanating from domestic cultivation (from the plants and from electrical hazards); as a result of neglect (either of care responsibilities or the provision of basic needs); and as a result of homelessness through the (legal and social) policing of cultivation.

'[Cultivation] is a breach of tenancy under ...[the housing trust]...One of the impacts is homelessness. We take a tenancy enforcement against the tenant for doing it or we exclude, say if the parents have been forced into doing it...and we end up excluding the son or the daughter, then they'll become homeless...It's put them on the streets' (Professional, World Café).

A key justification for drug prohibition is that it protects the vulnerable from drug related harms: in Thornbridge, however, we see prohibition *enhancing* vulnerability. As Lenton et al. (2000) have shown, convicting individuals of cannabis related offences negatively affects both immediate and future accommodation, employment and relationship prospects, evidencing that prohibitionist control itself has damaging long-term consequences.

### *(Lack of) Knowledge and Community Concerns/Anxieties*

In discussion with community groups about the links between cultivation and crime, those with a lack of direct experience commonly conflated cultivation and dealing, expressing concerns about neighbourhood problems through increased footfall of strangers and potential violence. These memes stood in stark contrast to the accounts of cultivators offered by professionals (below) whose direct experience led them to understand many cultivators to be victims rather than perpetrators of violence and subject to economic oppression rather than affluence. In fact a number of professionals suggested that cultivators made good neighbours as they did not want to draw attention to their activities, either from the police or other cultivators or dealers.

‘[I]f they’re cultivating cannabis next door they’re going to be the best neighbours ever. Compared to what you could have. You could have a problematic alcohol user or a class A user who are causing all sorts of problems. Where the likelihood is that if they’re doing that they’ll keep their head down. They’re not going to want to bring the police to the door’ (Professional, World Café).

This was confirmed by the cultivators themselves, who said they made considerable efforts to keep a ‘low profile.’ The one community participant who had direct experience of cultivation by his neighbour confirmed that until the arrest, no one would have known he was cultivating.

‘The bloke that faced [lived opposite] me [a cultivator]...CSOs [Community Service Officers] always told me ‘you’ll smell it.’ Well I’m telling you for a fact that we never smelt anything. When the police went in they looked at me and my partner as if we

were daft and let it go on...I never smelt anything...he said there were 19 odd plants in there' (Community Participant, Focus Group).

This adds credence to the assertion that a lack of direct experience or accurate information enhances anxiety (Chiricos et al., 2000), both in professionals and the community, due to misinformation around anti-social behaviour, crime and cultivation.

### *Criminals and Criminalisation*

Professionals described a significant increase in people entering the criminal justice system through the policing of use and cultivation, particularly people they identified as outside the 'usual service user profile'. This finding is not uncommon and was shared by Viscountess Runciman's independent Police Foundation report on the effectiveness of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act:

'[The prohibitionist policy on cannabis] did more harm than it prevented; because apart from being an expensive policy to enforce, it criminalised large numbers of otherwise law-abiding, mainly young, people to the detriment of their futures' (Runciman, 2000 in Acevedo, 2007).

This criminalisation of those who are otherwise law abiding is particularly apparent as socio-economic conditions deteriorate, again suggesting that cultivation is an effect more than a

cause of social problems, and demonstrating the damaging effects of a one-size-fits-all policy when the motivation for cultivation varies widely.

‘The heterogeneity of the set of participants to the cannabis cultivation industry – including adolescents and otherwise law-abiding individuals – contribute to making cannabis cultivation a difficult object of policy intervention. Recognizing such diversity is central to understanding how the industry has spread and developed to reach countries and individuals who we would not have considered could be involved in drug production as traditionally defined’ (Potter et al., 2011: 13).

Ancrum and Treadwell’s (2016) ethnographic study of cannabis cultivators highlights three key issues that are pertinent here. First, that the ‘local micro economies’ (:73) of cannabis cultivation draw people into the trade due to the ‘ever-diminishing legitimate economic opportunities’ (:71) within marginalised communities. Second, that criminal entrepreneurs, drawn to cannabis cultivation due to the lucrative nature of the market, specifically target vulnerable people to exploit their homes as cultivation sites. Consequentially, the vulnerable will continue to be targeted as long as the profitable black-market spawned by prohibition continues. Third, that such cultivators ‘stand alone from organised crime groups’ and are mostly local ‘entrepreneurs keen to identify and exploit gaps in the market’ (:71). These findings appear to mirror the landscape of Thornbridge. For example, the only mention of Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) within this study came from police and housing professionals who were more involved in the enforcement aspects of cultivation. They felt that the small-scale cultivations were linked by association to organised crime.

'It may seem like it's one lad in his back bedroom and you think well that's not linked to organised crime, but I would suggest that it is. Don't think of organised crime as something that's marketed on a mass scale. It's almost a cottage industry but link all those individual properties together and there's an individual who's directing that operation and its feeding into organised crime' (Professional, World Café).

None were able to offer specific evidence of OCG activity however and the enforcement-led professionals themselves confessed that their role prejudiced their views by exposing them most often to the more problematic aspects of cannabis production.

'Probably you've got quite a jaded group here to be honest because we're all to do with...like you've got a heavy police presence in this group and so you think, you know, my perception will be that [cannabis use and cultivation] is really high cos of the job I do and I'm exposed to it' (Professional, World Café).

Most professionals felt that criminality risks came more from individual *dealers* controlling patches of cultivators which had the potential to cause turf issues, again something confirmed by cultivators and again an issue exacerbated by the illegality of the drug. This is consistent with international findings which demonstrate that harm from drug markets often stem more from their illegal status than their direct effects (Babor et al., 2009).

In the case of Thornbridge, connections between cannabis cultivation and organised crime appear to have been overstated due to an adherence to normative ideology. Whilst UK

research has found evidence of links between cannabis production and OCGs, this was demonstrably in a small minority of cases (Kirby and Penna, 2010; Kirby and Peal, 2015). In the current research, assumptions of violent, large-scale and/or OCG-linked cultivators were contradicted by reporting from professionals and cultivators themselves, of a profile of often-vulnerable individuals cultivating due to debt (not only drug specific debt but general domestic debt in the current economy). This finding is supported by national evidence that an increasing body of cultivators are motivated/coerced by the financial benefits of growing (either for themselves or as a smaller franchise for a dealer – see Ancrum and Treadwell, 2016). Poor economic conditions mean the potential financial appeal of cultivation cannot be underestimated and results in many of those who become cultivators being exploited vulnerable people (Bouchard et al., 2009).

The national picture again concurred with local findings from Thornbridge in that, from a harm minimisation perspective, many study participants felt that the policing of cultivation caused more damage than it prevented, by deterring coerced or vulnerable cultivators from reporting exploitation or accessing services and by placing dealers in competition with one another (rather than individuals growing their own products) which was seen as the source of violence associated with illicit trade. This evidence supports the case for a dismantling of the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act which is the source of prohibitionist policing in the UK. For Thornbridge, and indeed the rest of the UK and Europe, there is considerable evidence that a reconsideration of prohibitionist policy can reduce the harms of criminalisation.

### *Professional Tensions: Balancing enforcement and support*

The concerns around prohibitionist punitive policy in light of the knowledge that many cultivators were already vulnerable to social problems was demonstrated in the tensions

professionals identified in deciding the best response to cultivation i.e. whether enforcement or support was most appropriate. Such tensions existed both within and between agencies. Many noted that enforcement responses had limited effectiveness because deterrence alone simply did not work, demonstrated by the continued cultivation of some, despite enforcement action. For many, the criminal justice costs did not appear to outweigh the financial benefits and relatedly policing (again in the broadest sense) of cultivation was seen as failing to tackle root causes such as socio-economic deprivation. Many saw cultivation as a symptom more than a cause of social problems, meaning that deterrence in fact exacerbated underlying issues i.e. that many cultivators needed support due to vulnerability, either in terms of economic instability or simply their risk of exploitation for a range of reasons from mental health to debt. There were related concerns that enforcement action could add significantly to the social risks of use and cultivation, such as loss of tenancy and its related social problems, as well as people hiding mental health problems for fear it would be linked to cannabis use and/or cultivation and they would lose, for example, their children or home. Similarly, actions taken to avoid detection could increase the risks associated with cultivation, for example people growing in children's bedrooms rather than lofts to avoid police roof scanning (used to detect excessive heat signatures).

### **Conclusion: Knowledge, anxieties and vulnerabilities**

There have unquestionably been changes in the cannabis terrain, but concerns about the immediate impacts for cultivators and the communities around them must be contextualised: Firstly by distinguishing between direct experience, evidence-based information and common assumption; and secondly by couching the changes in the appropriate socio-economic and political context.

This study demonstrates that, in the absence of direct knowledge, experience or accurate, accessible information, many community members and indeed professionals 'fill in the blanks' using dominant conceptualisations of the drug market (Taylor, 2016). These misunderstandings and stereotypes result in the amplification of a range of fears and anxieties when people look for patterns from other social phenomenon (in this instance, class A drugs and drug dealers) to help them to reduce ambiguity in what is perceived as a new situation (here, domestic cannabis cultivation and 'new' strains of cannabis). This process provides further evidence of the damaging impacts of the socio-cultural construction of drugs within an era of prohibition (Taylor et al., 2016). Simultaneously it points to the need for an accurate, empirically driven public discourse (Brownstein, 2013), to rebut reductionist representations, which exaggerate potential impacts and fuel fears around the domestic production of cannabis (King, 2008).

In contrast, the study also found evidence of a laissez-faire tolerance of cultivation in some professionals and a range of community members, in cases where they had experience of cultivators and/or understood cultivation to be something that was unlikely to have a direct impact on those around them. This seems to indicate that an enhanced appreciation of the contemporary landscape altered individual's attitudes; with this element of the sample expressing less fear and anxiety. Simultaneously, a more nuanced appreciation of cultivation allowed this group to differentiate between criminality and exploitation and therefore identify vulnerability as a key characteristic amongst local cultivators, emphasising the need for enforcement mechanisms to be partnered with support services.



Whilst the findings from the study are geographically localised to one area of the North West of England, a significant majority of the issues highlighted support the national evidence, in that harm can emanate from misguided policy and lack of knowledge more than from the cultivation of the drug itself.

The findings suggest that perhaps not so much is new in the cannabis field. Undeniably, there has been a shift in the means of cannabis production and in terms of what is produced but a repeat of drug scare patterns is also observable in terms of the perception of skunk or 'skunk' as a 'new' drug and resultant anxieties produced by links to historic drug scares and normative prohibitionist constructions of drugs that will not be solved by 'more of the same' in terms of increasingly prohibitive, enforcement-focused policy. Established patterns of tightening control where there is increased fear are understandable, but repeatedly proven erroneous: police more; punish more; scare more; as policy foundations these are ineffective and indeed can increase social, economic and public health harms. The empirical evidence from Portugal, the Netherlands, the US and Spain demonstrates that something different can be something good. As Rowe succinctly puts it:

'While there is no denying the harms generated by substance addiction, all a criminal justice approach can offer us is what Willem De Haan has described as 'spiralling cycles of harm'. We know better than this, and it is in all our interests to start doing better' (ibid., 2014: 1).

The risks and harms of cannabis cultivation identified in this study were less from the commonly understood direct harms of the drug and its market, and more from the fears

resulting from knowledge and education deficits, exacerbated by the illegal and subsequently concealed nature of cannabis production under UK prohibition law. These harms can be reduced through a range of interventions, namely appropriate service provision and accessible education for communities and the professionals working in them, around the legal, social and health impacts of skunk. This would reduce anxieties based on stereotypes, give communities the capacity to make informed decisions and equip professionals to support their service users effectively. Consideration of realistic alternatives to the criminalisation of cannabis cultivators is critical to acknowledging the socio-economic drivers for many who cultivate, to reduce the established social harms of criminalisation processes (through reintegration rather than stigmatisation) and to prevent the re-victimisation of vulnerable groups in cases where cultivation is coerced.

Figure 1

<b>Participant Group</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Professionals and stakeholders	36
Community members	16
Mothers / grandmothers of cannabis users	4
Cannabis users	12
Cannabis cultivators	4

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