

# Grow op homes leave emotional and physical scars on their Calgary communities

OCTOBER 25, 2011 6:30 AM

Presented By:



Grow ops occur all around the city, but tend to group in newer suburbs where, police speculate, connections between neighbours have yet to be established.

**Photograph by:** Calgary Herald Archive, .

Maxine Hendricks and her husband were returning home from a shopping trip to Costco last month when they heard the most terrible sound in their neighbour's yard.

It was awful, she said; like someone banging a recycling bin against a wall.

Then her husband noticed the smoke streaming from the roof next door.

He sought the homeowner, their neighbour.

"Your grow op is on fire," Maxine Hendricks's recalled her husband saying. "The kid left. He just vanished . . . (my husband) told the kid to call 911, but the kid took off."

The Hendrickses had suspected they lived next to a grow op: Maxine's husband could smell the skunky odour from the beige and brown 1970s-era bungalow.

"If I (know) for a sure thing, I'll phone, but you don't know for sure," she said.

They never knew the neighbour's name. What they do know is that he left behind his van, a litter of kittens, about 200 marijuana plants and an ungodly, gutted mess inside the home.

Calgary Police Service busts hundreds of marijuana grow operations per year. In September, for example, a three-day grow op sweep uncovered 18 such houses. They seized almost 9,000 plants worth \$11 million.

Besides the fact they are illegal, grow ops are increasingly sophisticated enterprises that pose public safety hazards ranging from fire, black mould, electrocution and the detritus of organized crime. But their insidiousness goes even deeper. In the houses, streets and neighbourhoods nearby, grow ops leave a scar on communities, both physically — condemned grow op homes can take years before they are renovated and brought back into the market — and emotionally, by destroying people's perceptions of their own neighbourhoods.

As part of Project Calgary, the Herald examined public data on all the 2010 homes condemned because of health risks developed through the presence of an illegal marijuana grow operation. Such drug houses found they were particularly concentrated in suburban neighbourhoods near the northwest and northeast edges of the city. Most affected last year were New Brighton, Marlborough Park, Hidden Valley and Temple, where the Hendricks have lived for more than 15 years.

"It's gone downhill," she said. "Down the street are duplexes with rentals. Nobody keeps up their yards. Nobody does anything."

Although they are concentrated in suburban enclaves, grow ops can be found all over the city, according to Diane Colley-Urquhart, the Ward 13 alderman who started the STOP marijuana Grow Operations Coalition in 2005.

"This is not a policing problem, this is a community problem," she said. Grow op houses affect whole neighbourhoods; they sit on the market and pull down property values. They also pose a health risk. The high-humidity conditions required for plant growth usually leads to a major black mould problem that can only be fixed by stripping a house down to its wooden bones.

If owners are absent, that leaves the city to fix the problem on the backs of taxpayers. It also means some homebuyers might unknowingly purchase a house that once housed major problems.

"I've seen houses listed for sale that still had marijuana grow op plants, they were dead mind you, that were still in the basement," she said.

In addition, cash-flush criminals can artificially inflate house prices.

“Because the profits are so high with marijuana, they can just walk away from the house,” she said.

Colley-Urquhart said the city predicts it loses up to \$35 million per year because of power theft — another loss that drains money from law-abiding citizens.

“I think this is one of the consequences when people try to marginalize the significance of marijuana,” she said. “A pound of marijuana can sell for between \$4,000 and \$7,000 in the U.S. And our streets get flooded back with drugs. That affects our kids. We have a serious, serious drug problem in Calgary and marijuana is a key part of the cycle.”

The alderman said neighbourhoods beset by drug houses aren’t necessarily bad areas.

“The neighbours might be more astute. They know what’s going on and report the tips to Crime Stoppers,” she said.

Both Colley-Urquhart and the police agree: the best way to fight grow ops is to know your neighbours.

But in new suburbs, or communities filled with transitional residents, that’s hard.

While marijuana may be benign, the homes that grow the drug are not.

Maxine Hendricks now lives next to a gutted, emptied house. The floors have been ripped up, air ducts removed and windows plastered with fluorescent signs warning passersby not to enter. If history is any guide, the eyesore may stay that way, untouched, for as much as two more years.

What’s worse, the terrible clatter heard on the day of the fire was actually the sound of arcing electricity. The perpetrators used a shoddy electrical connection to bypass the meter, a method that allows power thieves to evade detection. Organized crime Insp. Kevin Forsen, with the Calgary Police Service, has now seen the imported device involved in two grow op house fires in the past month.

“They’re doing it in a dangerous manner, actually, and electrifying the ground,” he said. A neighbour could “put a metal stake in the ground and end up being electrocuted. For me, that’s the big issue with marijuana grow ops.”

Scott Sampson, a detective with the arson unit, suspects a rogue electrician could be behind the two fires — which means more neighbourhoods near grow ops could be at risk.

“It’s not a matter of if a fire is going to happen, it’s when it’s going to happen,” he said. “Whoever is setting these things up, it’s horrendous, the workmanship. They don’t use protectors. They don’t use any connectors.”

Most people know a few obvious signs of a grow operation: drawn window covers, the smell of pot and roofs that stay snow-free in the dead of winter because of the heat.

But Forsen said the criminals have grown more canny.

They will install lights on timers to make the house look like it's been lived in. They pick homes in suburban districts where they can work without notice.

"A big reason people run these grow ops on the premises in those neighbourhoods is that it's a quiet neighbourhood. If they stick to themselves and their houses and don't outwardly cause issues, people go on with their lives and don't pay attention," Forsen said.

While the operations may have become more hidden, they are also more dangerous, he said.

"Before, it would be almost a home business, generally speaking. Now what we're finding is the vast majority of these operations are wholesale operations involved with organized crime."

Maxine Hendricks barely knew the young man who ran the drug house next door. Another long-term neighbour, who lives across the street, recently sold his home. Everyone else seems new.

"I don't like to have anything to do with anybody," she said.

She knows the danger. Another grow op sits, boarded with wood, only a block away.

"I just block it out."

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