

Legal pot increases crime, grows the black market

By Jim Gerhardt

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If you listen to those who want to legalize marijuana in Arizona, you'll hear promises of how it will lower crime rates and end the black market. As a law enforcement officer in Colorado, I can tell you that these are empty promises and not what's happening in Colorado. The problems have been much bigger than the benefits.

Since the legalization of marijuana, the black market has grown. Colorado is now perceived as a safe haven for drug activity since marijuana was legalized in 2013 and drug organizations are flocking here to take advantage. That's not a road Arizona wants to go down.

As someone who works in a unit that specifically targets drug trafficking organizations, I've seen first-hand that legalizing marijuana didn't end the black market. Instead, Colorado became a place for it to thrive. For example, our unit just finished a year-and-half investigation of a group of people who came from Texas and bought homes all across the Denver and Colorado Springs areas for the sole purpose of growing marijuana. There were hundreds of plants on every property.

After a year-long investigation, search warrants were issued, about 40 arrests were made and 30 marijuana grow locations were processed. Over 6,000 pounds of marijuana were seized. It was all for distribution on the black market in Colorado or in other states. Approximately 30 people were charged with felony crimes related to this particular case. It was a very time-intensive, exhaustive case. Unfortunately, it's not unique.

People think that because marijuana is legal and you can grow it in your own home that it's much harder for law enforcement to detect it. They're right. It's much harder. That's why these drug organizations are coming to Colorado. They come to Colorado to essentially hide in plain sight. They will do the same in Arizona.

These out-of-state organized crime groups come to Colorado to take advantage of the laws and put marijuana on the local black market or ship it to other states. They have put a strain on law enforcement's time and resources. It has added problems at a magnitude we never saw coming.

Unfortunately, every state has problems with drugs. Before legalization in Colorado, marijuana occupied a small amount of our task force's time and resources. The rest of our time was devoted to taking down meth labs, heroin operations and other drugs. Today there is such a community outcry because of these home-grown operations by drug cartels and the amount of marijuana being sold on the black market that our unit now spends significantly more time on marijuana than we did before legalization.

The idea that legalizing marijuana will stop drug cartels and the black market simply isn't true and it isn't what's happening in Colorado. We're arresting more people for marijuana-related issues than we ever did before. There are now more violent crimes associated with marijuana,

which was not the case 10 years ago. Violent crimes have increased because drug trafficking organizations are moving into Colorado and using the existing laws as a front.

Arizonans need to really do their research and take a look at the effects legalization of marijuana has had on Colorado communities. Drug cartels and the black market are thriving. Police resources are devoted to the illegal sale of marijuana and the violent crimes associated with it more than ever before.

Marijuana legalization hasn't been a problem solver, but a problem creator.

Sgt. Jim Gerhardt has nearly 3 decades of experience as a commissioned officer in the Denver metro area, including 18 years working and supervising undercover drug operations. He is vice president of the Colorado Drug Investigators Association and a founding member of the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children.