

Marijuana Violence: Two Elbert County Killings Add to Alleged Pot Homicides

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Last night, November 9, the Elbert County Sheriff's Office revealed the discovery of two men who'd been shot to death west of Simla, Colorado, at what's characterized as an illegal marijuana grow. The incident feeds into the law-enforcement narrative that cannabis sales have led to increased violence in the state days after the fifth anniversary of Amendment 64, the 2012 measure that sanctioned the practice in regard to recreational pot. At this writing, details about the latest homicides are few. At 7:58 a.m. on the 9th, the ECSO notes, deputies responded to a residence in the 30000 block of Highway 24, just west of Simla; a screen capture near the scene is on view at the top of this post.

The initial call involved claims of a suspicious death, and it proved accurate. Upon their arrival at the building, deputies found what are described as "two deceased males who had sustained gunshot wounds."

The ECSO release adds that "the rural residence is the site of an illegal marijuana grow operation, and investigators believe the operation is a contributing factor in the deaths of the two males." However, the sheriff's office also maintains that there is no danger to the public — verbiage commonly used in murder-suicide cases. There's no telling at this point whether the supposition about marijuana's role in the homicides of the two thus-far-unidentified men is accurate; the ECSO is keeping other information to itself amid the ongoing investigation. But law enforcers have regularly tied cannabis to killings since Amendment 64's passage, and the frequency of these assertions hasn't slowed over the past year or so.

Last November, outgoing Denver District Attorney Mitch Morrissey talked to us about a letter he'd written to the No on 64 Campaign and SAM Action regarding attempts to pass a recreational-marijuana-legalization proposal in California (the effort was successful). In our interview, Morrissey said, "If there's a pot-related homicide, as when people come here and get into a shootout in Park Hill and there are three people killed [during an alleged drug deal], that's an increase in the homicide rate. And when you have boys hopping a fence to steal pot plants and one gets killed and the other gets paralyzed, that's an increase in the homicide rate, too. And in those cases, there's a direct relationship between them and marijuana."

The day after our chat with Morrissey, we analyzed 44 Denver homicides in 2016 up to that point to determine how many of them appeared to have been motivated by pot. We determined that four had a connection to marijuana, representing one fewer death than the five people who had been killed by police officers during that year to the date of publication.

The following March, the Colorado Springs Police Department put a focus on what was termed the nexus of marijuana and murder in the community. Here are the key statistics presented by the CSPD earlier this year:

2015: 29 total homicides occurred, 2 of which have a marijuana nexus.

2016: 22 total homicides occurred, 8 of which have a marijuana nexus.

2017: 8 year to date homicides, 1 of which has a marijuana nexus.

Included in this total was the matter of Michael Durante, who in February was found guilty of first-degree murder in the stabbing/bludgeoning death of Kyle Sullivan, who'd been watching over his roommates' home marijuana grow.

Then, this past August, 18th Judicial District DA George Brauchler, who's running for governor at this writing (though he's reportedly thinking about switching his 2018 electoral goal to the Colorado Attorney General's office) penned an op-ed for *Westword* in which he argued that there have been at least eleven pot-related homicides in Colorado in the wake of legalization.

"Since the passage of Amendment 64, jurisdictions across the state have noted significant violent crime related to marijuana cultivation and distribution," Brauchler wrote. "Our jurisdiction of Arapahoe, Douglas, Elbert and Lincoln counties — 45 percent more populous than Denver — has had at least eleven homicides motivated by marijuana since passage of Amendment 64, including the [Shawn] Geerdes murder."

Brauchler added: "That number includes the yet-uncharged death of Travis Mason, who was killed while working as a security guard at the Green Heart dispensary in Aurora. Zakaria Hussein Ali is spending the rest of his life in prison for stealing the marijuana plants growing in the basement of Carlos Muse and leaving him to bleed to death in his home."

Marijuana-reform proponents reject implications that marijuana has made Colorado less safe. In an interview about A64's fifth anniversary linked above, attorney and amendment co-author Brian Vicente said, "I think it's hard for drug prohibitionists who have spent their entire lives demonizing marijuana and marijuana users. It's difficult for them to admit that they were wrong."

The latest deaths in Elbert County will make such an admission even less likely than before.