Marijuana harvest brings seasonal spike in home invasions

BY JULIE JOHNSON
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Robbers with guns and in search of marijuana have raided at least 11 homes since August in Sonoma and Mendocino counties, leaving a trail of violence in their wake and marking a seasonal trend that officials say is timed with the outdoor pot harvest.

The gunmen are also looking for the stockpiles of cash and weapons that are often found where marijuana is grown or processed.

Three people have been shot and a woman was raped in the recent incidents. Others were tied up and assaulted, their homes ransacked.

In some cases the invaders were possibly lured by the smell and sight of pot plants at properties. The maturing plants' pungent smell and potentially towering stalks reach their peak around the autumn harvest for pot grown outside. In at least two situations bad or outdated information led assailants to threaten and tie up unsuspecting families in homes where no marijuana was found.

"These robberies are extremely violent. They are coming in there with weapons and in some cases the victims have their own weapons," said Santa Rosa Police Sgt. Rich Celli, who runs the narcotics team.

A 19-year-old man was charged with attempted murder after a Rincon Valley man was shot in the leg while confronting intruders at his home. He was growing pot indoors and out, police said.

In Mendocino County, a 25-year-old man has been accused of raping a resident who is a relative during a home-invasion outside Ukiah. Jonathan Otero-Cruz of San Bernardino and three others were arrested with 10 pounds of marijuana in the car during a traffic stop on Highway 101 in Sonoma County shortly after the crime took place, Sonoma County sheriff's officials said.

A Santa Rosa teenager suspected of traveling to Mendocino County and attacking a man in his Redwood Valley home was apprehended in Florida. A Willits-area man was critically wounded by gunfire in his home in a separate case.

Most recently, on Nov. 21, a Santa Rosa family on Coffey Lane packing up the car for a holiday road trip were confronted by two men with guns. All residents but a 5-year-old child were tied up and the home was ransacked. Although pot had previously been grown on the property there was none that day and the robbers left with only cellphones and a tablet, police said. No suspects have been identified.

The cases stand out against the overall decrease in crime nationwide over the past decade. In Santa Rosa, reported robberies were down 17 percent in 2013 compared to 2012, from 126 cases to 105. They were down 26 percent compared to a decade ago. In Mendocino County, 21 robberies were reported in 2013, compared to 25 in 2012.

The FBI national crime statistics program does not track data on home-invasion robberies, but the federal agency does track data about the location of robberies.

Nationally, there were 50,081 reports of robberies at residences in 2013, according to the FBI. The average value of items taken was $1,480.

“We suspect there are a lot of these that go unreported as well because the victims, they’re involved in an illegal activity,” said Santa Rosa Police Sgt. Dave Linscomb, who runs the violent crimes team.

Marijuana is still a valuable target despite the proliferation of pot gardens throughout the region and the popularity of cannabis as medicine.

People growing marijuana, even for medicinal purposes, “would be naïve to believe that just because they have a legitimate purpose or reason to grow marijuana that they won’t be targeted,” Celli said.

“It’s about profit,” he said.

Robbers impersonated law enforcement in two separate instances, a crime that carries additional penalties, including men dressed in clothing marked “FBI” at a home outside Santa Rosa and a man claiming to be a deputy who frisked a Windsor man outside his home.

The reported cases include:

Aug. 21 — 5:30 a.m. on Colony Drive in Redwood Valley, Mendocino County
Two men with guns woke up a couple in their 60s in bed, demanding money and drugs. No marijuana present.

Sept. 7 — 4 a.m. on East Road in Redwood Valley, Mendocino County
Four Santa Rosa teens arrested on suspicion of barging into a man’s home, assaulting and interrogating him at gunpoint and leaving with several marijuana plants and guns.

Sept. 11 — 1:30 a.m. on Windsor Court in Santa Rosa
A 19-year-old Santa Rosa man is suspected of shooting a resident after breaking into the man’s home to steal marijuana.

Sept. 14 — 10 p.m. on Finley Avenue in Santa Rosa
Eight armed and masked robbers break into home, which police later find is the site of an extensive pot processing operation. The suspects were still at large and seven people associated with the home were arrested on suspected drug charges.

Oct. 8 — Redemeyer Road northeast of Ukiah
Otero-Cruz, of San Bernadino, and three other men are facing a slew of felony charges stemming from a home-invasion robbery during which a 37-year-old woman was raped and an 80-year-old man assaulted. One of the suspects previously lived at the home, sheriff's officials said.

Oct. 14 — 4:30 p.m. on Sebastopol Road in Santa Rosa
Two masked men with guns and a woman with a knife confront a resident in his backyard, forcing the man inside and assaulting him, sheriff's officials said. The trio left with about 10 pounds of pot and the man's truck. No arrests have been reported.

Oct. 16 — 2:25 p.m. on Merced Avenue in Santa Rosa
A man was shot at his home during an encounter with men posing as FBI agents, according to witnesses and Sonoma County sheriff's officials. Detectives were investigating whether marijuana was a motive. Men with FBI markings on their clothing were seen running from a house following gunfire. No arrests have been reported.

Oct. 22 — 7 a.m. on Colony Drive in Redwood Valley
Deputies arrested three East Bay men covered in marijuana residue on suspicion of conspiracy to commit robbery after a tip about a suspicious vehicle in an area where prior home-invasions had taken place.

Nov. 10 — 1:45 a.m. on Wilcox Road in Windsor
A 27-year-old Santa Rosa man was arrested on suspicion of posing as a deputy when confronting a man and taking his marijuana plants.

Nov. 16 — Highway 162 near Willits
A man was shot and two others assaulted by two suspects, who left with cash, precious metals and processed marijuana. No arrests reported and the wounded man's condition was unavailable.

Nov. 21 — 7 p.m. on Coffey Lane in Santa Rosa
Two men with guns tied up residents with zip ties but found no marijuana. The family had been packing their car for a road trip to Mexico and police speculated the robbers thought the suitcases contained marijuana. The suspects remain at large.

Anyone with information about the cases can contact the Santa Rosa Police Department at 543-3590, the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office at 565-2185 and the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office tip line at 234-2100.