



San Bernardino County Sheriff's deputies raid an illegal cannabis farm in Newberry Springs, Calif., on March 29, 2024. Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images

PREMIUM REPORTS

Toxic Homes For Sale: How California's Illegal Marijuana Industry Ruins Houses

Officials are finding houses riddled with residual nerve agent pesticides from China that aren't in any U.S. chemical library.

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By Beige Luciano-Adams | August 27, 2024 Updated: August 28, 2024

LOS ANGELES—On a recent summer morning, a caravan of unmarked state police vehicles and white hazmat trucks crept past strip malls

and wide intersections, making its way toward a pair of modest homes in a remote suburb north of Los Angeles.

A command came from the officers in the front of the black-and-white: “Seat belts off—in case we start taking fire.”



A map shows the location of the illegal marijuana grow site. The Epoch Times

But there was no shootout. Just a tense half hour as a phalanx of two dozen state police—agents from the Department of Cannabis Control (DCC)—kept snipers trained on the house, waiting for the second of two suspects to emerge.

When she finally did, petite and barefoot in a black dress, the effect was mercifully anticlimactic.

Illegal cannabis cultivation operations, or “grows,” are a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry in

California, dominated by a mix of transnational criminal organizations that authorities believe are symbiotic, if adversarial.

When agents serve a warrant, they often find human trafficking victims, automatic weapons, booby traps and, increasingly, banned toxic pesticides smuggled from China.

This particular raid, in Lancaster, netted around 1,020 plants—a modest haul compared with the herculean grows that have become common across California’s booming black market.

But such mild suburban tableaux belie a sleeping, sinister threat.

“What we have right now is organized criminal enterprises literally destroying the city building by building as they modify them for illegal cultivation,” Mike Katz, a Lancaster code enforcement officer who heads the city’s cannabis unit, told The Epoch Times.

“They’re endangering the families who will occupy those buildings in the future, they are lowering the value of neighboring properties and dragging the whole community down,” he said.

‘Super Toxic’

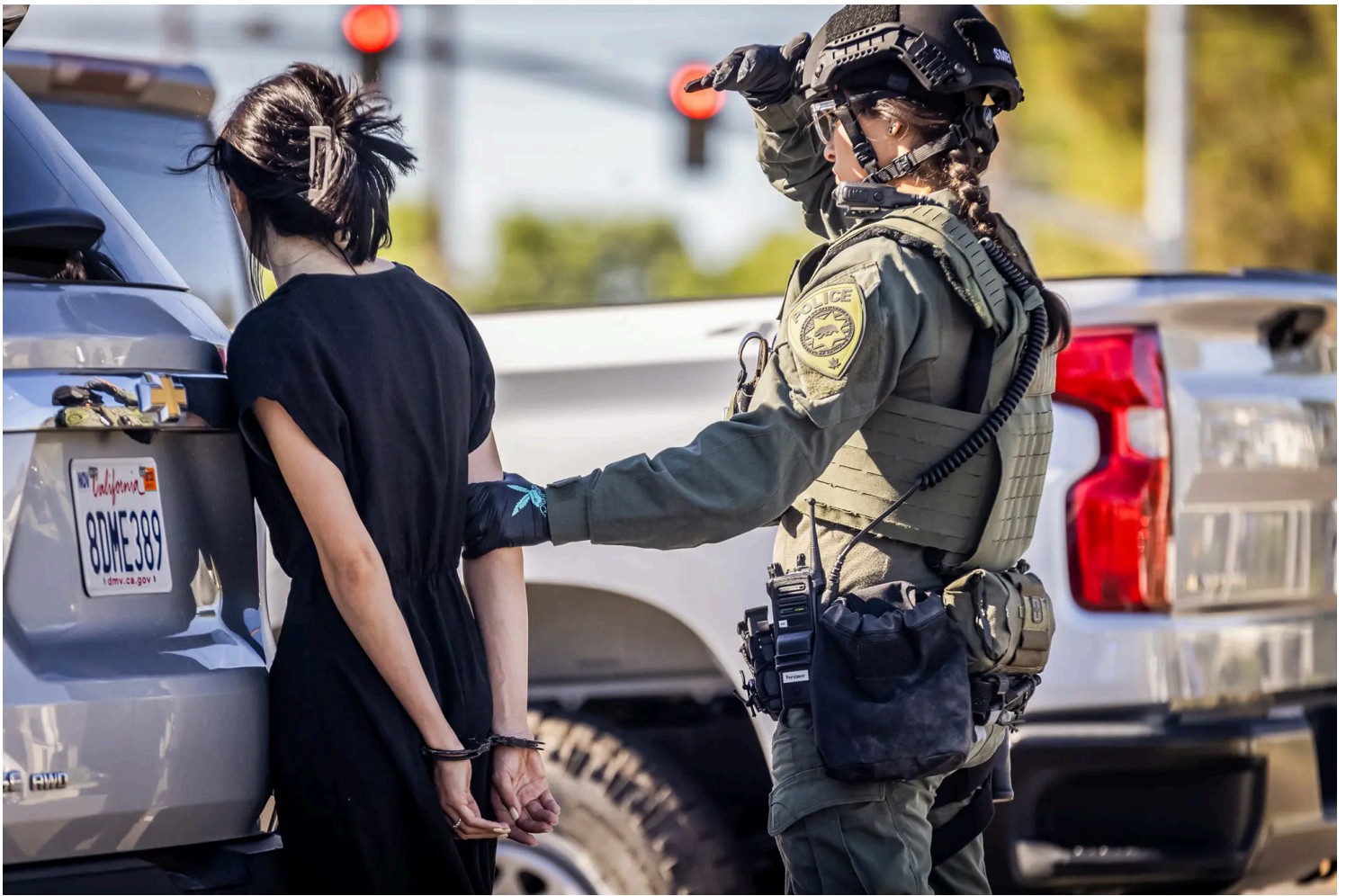
Buildings contaminated by illegal grows are dangerous because the harsh pesticides growers use permeate every surface—ceilings, walls, floors, vents and drywall.

Toxic black mold blooms in the 75 percent humidity needed to grow marijuana. The massive amounts of water and electricity required to sustain an operation can result in structural damage to vents and sunken floors, overloaded transformers and corroded wiring just itching for a fire.

Katz, whom the city’s chief of police refers to as the department’s “Swiss Army knife,” has been a firefighter, reserve police officer, and now, an unarmed code enforcement official. He approaches the job with a certain zeal, devouring scientific studies and how-to books on cultivation, and generally making it his mission to stop grow houses from slipping through the cracks.

Owners can often get away with making cosmetic fixes—“candy coating,” as one inspector puts it—if local governments don’t intervene before they start concealing the damage.





Police officers arrest people while raiding an illegal cannabis site in Lancaster, Calif., on Aug. 14, 2024. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

Working and middle-class families migrate to bedroom communities like Lancaster, where you can still find a single-family home with a backyard for [around](#) \$500,000—about half the median price in Los Angeles, according to Redfin. You may find one for even less if a grower has been busted and is offloading at a discount.

The injustice of it rankles Katz. He imagines families struggling to buy a home, and their toddlers probing surfaces tainted with insecticides—potent carcinogens, endocrine disruptors, nerve agents and others no one even knows how to identify.

“They are super toxic, but very effective,” he said. “One we just learned of last week has a 14-year half-life. We did a search warrant back in January and didn’t get test results until this week. I’m having

to tell all the detectives and everyone involved that we were exposed to these chemicals.”

Low-cost housing also attracts sophisticated criminal enterprises looking for ways to launder money and turn a profit. Often, illegal growers can do that after just one harvest. Typically, an operation can turn four to six harvests a year.

Wholesale value for the plants seized in the modest raid we accompanied—they were days away from a second harvest—is more than \$540,000.

The houses look normal from the outside, and growers build walls to conceal grow rooms, according to Morris.

To avoid detection and stay a step ahead of authorities, growers are continually adapting.

“There are probably a lot more growing indoors that we don’t know about,” Jennifer Morris, a code enforcement officer with Riverside County and former head of its cannabis unit, told The Epoch Times. “But they’re pretty good at keeping themselves looking very nondescript.”

From the outside, the houses look normal, and it typically takes a fire, robbery, or neighbors reporting electrical theft to tip off law or code enforcement, Morris said. Growers also build walls to conceal grow rooms, and sometimes install a resident worker or a dog to give the appearance of normality.

Because the entire industry is clandestine, no one can accurately estimate the extent of the problem. Many communities might not even

be aware it's happening.

“I’ve talked to cities where they say, ‘We don’t have a problem,’” said David Welch, an attorney who contracts as a special counsel with cities in Los Angeles County that want “a more aggressive” approach to narcotics enforcement. “Then law enforcement will hit a grow in that city.”



Police officers wear protective gear while raiding an illegal cannabis site in Lancaster. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

Where there is one, there are likely more. But perpetrators are opportunistic, itinerant.

“We have seen the same owners of properties in different counties that have had illegal cultivation on them,” Morris said.

Wilson Linares, who leads the Department of Cannabis Control's Los Angeles County law enforcement unit, said it's hard to pinpoint which players are tied to which territories. "They're just everywhere. It doesn't really stay in that area, they just go wherever they can master operations."

Growers, he said, "do a good job of layering their operation. I don't think they even know they're working for the same organization sometimes."

That makes it difficult to go after the few bigger fish, to which, some insiders say, all these operations are ultimately "funneling up."

Those caught at the grows are inevitably low-level employees, if not forced labor, and are typically interviewed and released. Illegal cultivation—anything more than six plants per person, whether it's 10 or 10,000—is a misdemeanor in California.

"Sometimes our investigations do a good job at digging to make sure we're eradicating the problem," Linares said. "But sometimes they cut losses and move on and go somewhere else. We have to follow and chase them. It takes a lot of effort and time to conduct these investigations."

Like meth houses of decades past, there are residential grows too damaged to flip.

But it's the moderate ones, the ones that are at risk of selling at a discount to families, that keep Katz up at night.

If public safety officials don't discover a grow before property owners start hiding the damage, it's often too late, according to Katz.

While they can't prevent the sale, or in many cases, habitation, building inspectors and code enforcement officers use "red tagging" and other methods to compel compliance—like creating liens to cloud the title, or disconnecting utilities. And in some cases, those costs and headaches transfer to new owners.

California law gives local government broad authority to abate "public nuisances"—which include dangerous and contaminated buildings, Katz said. But enforcing compliance can often depend on a municipality's ability to pay for things like civil lawsuits.

If public safety officials don't discover a grow before property owners start hiding the damage, it's often too late.

"There is no roadmap," Katz said. "These sociopaths are buying and selling these houses."



A police officer confiscates marijuana from an illegal cannabis site in Lancaster, Calif., on Aug. 14, 2024. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

‘I Didn’t Know Anything’

There were signs. Two dozen large bags of what Virginia Aceres thought was ordinary grass fertilizer and canisters of chemicals bearing designs of spiders and worms that the previous owner left behind. He offered to pay her \$500 to get rid of them.

In two months, a \$10,000 electricity bill.

Aceres said she moved from Los Angeles to the Antelope Valley because she didn’t want her kids hanging out with people who use drugs. She nabbed a five-bedroom house for \$535,000, \$15,000 below asking. “It’s super big—we thought, oh wow, this is perfect.”

But she found out after moving in that it had been used by the previous owners to grow weed.

“Every afternoon the upstairs smells of marijuana and it gives me a raging headache,” she told The Epoch Times. When a city inspector came by and pointed out a convertor wired to steal electricity and stains on the bathroom ceilings from burned chemicals, she said, “Now I understand.”

The five bedrooms were originally three, she discovered; the previous owner had added two and it was up to her to register the additions with the city.

When property owners obtain permits to modify buildings but don’t follow up to call for a final inspection of the work, this can tip off code enforcement and form part of the basis for a warrant. So too can electrical fires or electricity theft.

But Aceres said she bought her house without any compliance obligations that would arise from a pre-sale code enforcement; inspectors came after she moved in and pointed out the damage.

The fuses at Aceres’ house are constantly blowing, especially if electronics are running at the same time, and electricians tell her she has to completely redo the wiring.

“My daughter relies on a machine to help her breathe,” Aceres said, referring to a nebulizer that delivers oxygen and liquid steroids. “We had to buy a generator. She’s 9; she can’t ride a bike, can’t walk more than 20 minutes, can’t run. At night she has panic attacks, she comes to my door in pain, she can’t breathe, so I connect the machine and give her medicine.”

A neighbor warned her the previous owner had installed multiple, massive air conditioners and there were fires. People cruise by the

house. Someone showed up looking to collect on a debt. The IRS, the police and city inspectors have all visited.

“For all this, I’d like to move—because they’re going to confuse us and they’re going to think that we sell drugs or have something to do with all that. But we haven’t been able to sell the house because of all these problems,” she said. “If a buyer asks questions we’re obligated to tell them the truth.”



A police officer (L) tosses a bag (R) of confiscated marijuana into the back of a truck. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

Banned Pesticides

Labor and sex trafficking, animal abuse, gun violence and rampant environmental crimes have long been associated with illegal marijuana cultivation.

The prevalence of indoor grows and collateral impacts on residential buildings are not new or limited to California. In 2017 Denver police [estimated](#) one in 10 homes was being used to cultivate, leaving the city with a dangerous mold problem.

But the influx of banned toxic insecticides in California’s illicit operations is relatively novel, according to those on the front lines.

“About a year ago we started seeing these banned pesticides—they’ve made their way into most of the cultivation sites,” said Jeremiah LaRue, sheriff of Siskiyou County.

LaRue oversees a mountainous swath of Northwest California bordering Oregon, notorious for flourishing outdoor grows. Last year, the DCC [confiscated](#) more marijuana in Siskiyou than any other county aside from Alameda.

While operations have moved from federal lands to private property in recent years, LaRue said these days it’s a mix of outdoor grows, “hoop houses” and some converted residential homes.

Linares said he noticed an uptick in pesticides as some producers transitioned from outdoor to indoor.

“They’re easier to operate in that they can control the environment a lot better. So that’s why at least in the Los Angeles County area you see quite a few indoor grows,” he said, pointing to the Antelope Valley as a primary SoCal hotspot, along with the San Fernando Valley and Frazier Park in Kern County.



The easiest solution is to spray all kinds of pesticides so there are no problems with pests and you get the highest yield and make as much money as possible.

Josh Wurzer, CEO and cofounder, SC Labs

It may seem counterintuitive that indoor operations are increasingly relying on contraband pesticides, but the lack of natural predators inside means spider mites, aphids, mildew and black rot or fungus can easily take hold, explained Josh Wurzer, CEO and cofounder of SC

Labs, a cannabis testing and research lab based in Santa Cruz, with outlets in Colorado, Arizona, Oregon, and Michigan.

“Once you get a single fungus spore or any tiny spider mite into a grow and it starts to proliferate, they take root and it takes off. There are no birds to eat them or natural controls to keep pests in check like there are outdoors.”

Morris, with Riverside County Code Enforcement, said she has observed a lot of indoor grows using fumigated miticides.



A room full of black market marijuana plants is seized by the DEA in Colorado. DEA

“They tend to have a problem with spider mites, and I think some of the problem is someone tending several house grows, they get mites on them and take them to the next location.”

In the regulated market, growers have adopted organic solutions—such as neem oil, predatory insects, and sterile environments, Wurzer said. But on the black market, where there is no testing and no regulation, the point is to make money as fast as possible.

“If no one is checking, if consumers won’t know the difference, people will do what is easiest,” said Wurzer. “And the easiest solution is to spray all kinds of pesticides so there are no problems with pests and you get the highest yield and make as much money as possible.”

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation publishes a pocket guide for law and code enforcement officers, listing more than two dozen insecticides, fungicides, miticides, rodenticides, and plant growth regulators to look out for in mitigation operations. Several are banned in the United States.

Increasingly, officers say, they are finding chemicals they aren’t familiar with or can’t identify.

‘No One Is Going to Find It’

At recent raids, Katz’s team found endrine, a highly toxic pesticide with neurological, developmental, and reproductive effects that was discontinued in the United States in 1986 and has been shown to persist in soil for 14 years or more. They also found endosulfan sulfate, a similarly toxic pesticide known to be an endocrine disruptor, that was [phased out](#) in the United States by 2010 and globally banned under the 2011 Stockholm Convention.

“All kinds of chemicals are being found. The ones from China, they’re not even in any chemical library,” said Katz, noting they’re having to send samples to an “extremely expensive” lab in Sacramento.

“The EPA got involved. We’ve found all kinds of nerve agent pesticides, and they’re not listed in any of these libraries for the machines that

read this stuff.”

When it comes to testing for pesticides on the regulated market, Wurzer said a proper lab can find any chemical eventually—if they’re looking for it and they know it exists.

“But we’re not as good at finding things we’re not looking for. If someone develops a new pesticide, until people realize it’s being used, no one is going to be looking for it, so no one is going to find it.”

That problem extends to products consumers buy in state-regulated dispensaries. While Wurzer says less than 3 percent of regulated cannabis samples his lab tests contain pesticides, growers are getting “really creative,” using compounds they know won’t show up in panels in order to circumvent regulation. “A lot of these line up with what we find in illegal grows—pesticides with Chinese origin,” he said.

After a recent investigation found “alarming” levels of toxic pesticides in regulated products, Wurzer said he’s begun offering an expanded testing panel that includes some of these known black market pesticides. But there are plenty of disreputable labs, he said, that will produce results their clients want to see.



A vacate order is taped to the window of the site. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

On illegal grow sites, some pesticides look like wood chips, burned in halved soda cans as a fumigant; others come in bottles that are mixed and repurposed, leaving public safety teams to guess.

“They started bringing them into indoor grows, and it’s really hard for us to identify all the banned pesticides because they start taking labels off, they start mixing the canned products with other items, and it’s really hard to pinpoint exactly which items are from where, or if we’re finding the same items somewhere else,” Linares said.

The fact that these compounds are inhaled—either by unsuspecting consumers who think they’re smoking regulated cannabis, or by unsuspecting residents who move into a former grow house—exacerbates the harm.

As Wurzer explains, when the plant is inhaled rather than eaten, it goes directly into the lungs, bypassing many of the body's natural defense mechanisms, like the digestive system and the liver, which filter toxins.

“Any pesticide deemed harmful on a food crop in the U.S. would be extra harmful when it's inhaled,” Wurzer said.

“I can only imagine anyone who moves into these houses where they've been spraying indoors for years and years—certainly there would be off-gassing of these pesticides and the people living there would be breathing them in.”

Nor do they disappear when you stop using them. Wurzer recalled when growers using pesticides to cultivate medical marijuana at indoor facilities tried to transition after legalization but kept failing tests even though they'd phased out the chemicals.

“This was a huge issue. ... Because these pesticides permeate every surface and are leeching out of the walls and ceilings,” he said. “The drywall absorbed them, the paint had absorbed them. The grow lights and the heat—now they were continuing to off-gas. The contaminated plants would fail pesticide tests a year later.”

At high enough levels, those agents can be just as toxic to humans as they are to bugs, he said, recalling the history of companies like Monsanto and Bayer, which repurposed compounds originally developed as chemical warfare during WWII for the agricultural market.

Similar to the challenge of regulating performance enhancing drugs in sports, he said, pesticide producers can create new compounds that will evade existing test panels.

“It's a cat-and-mouse game we're always playing,” Wurzer said.



Police officers inspect multiple rows of marijuana plants in a grow room. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

'It's Just Pot'

California is home to one of the largest legal cannabis markets in the world. But since legalization the state's black market has only grown, dwarfing and infecting its regulated sales.

"The bargain that was given to voters was—we'll give out licenses, collect taxes to fund government services and smash the illegal market and the criminal organizations would go away," Katz said. "That's not happening. And these collateral issues are something they hadn't even thought about."

Recent raids have netted tens of thousands of plants and millions of dollars of product from subterranean operations the size of football

fields. The state, touting ramped up enforcement, has [seized](#) more than \$120 million worth of illegal cannabis so far this year.

In early August, the DCC reported the state's Unified Cannabis Enforcement Task Force had served 309 warrants since its inception in 2022, and the agency [reported](#) serving 386 search warrants since it was formed in 2021, in operations that overlap with the task force's. A representative for DCC said its enforcement division has served 250 warrants related to indoor grows since forming in 2021.

But some say soft laws, a patchwork approach, and regulatory blind spots—as well as a lack of interest from federal authorities and local prosecutors—are allowing the black market to wreak havoc.

Tom Lackey, a California assembly member whose district includes the Antelope Valley, thinks the dangers are underestimated, in part because of a prevailing misconception that “it’s just pot.”

He points to the fact that black market marijuana comprises some 80 percent of total sales in California, , and licensed growers pressured by high taxes and the cost of compliance are taking shortcuts to survive. Various industry analyses over the past several years have estimated between one half and two thirds of California sales are from illegal sources. According to a 2023 report by New Frontier Data, an estimated \$77 billion—or 72 percent of all U.S. sales in 2022—were from illicit sources.

80%
Black market marijuana comprises some 80 percent of total sales in California, according to Lackey.

“We’ve overdone it. It’s well-intentioned but we’ve done very little to go after these illicit players. The majority of our focus is directed toward those trying to comply, which is ironic,” Lackey said.

When the state does go after illicit players, it’s costly and time-consuming, and labor-intensive intelligence gathering and warrants can lead to dead ends.

During the recent Lancaster raid, the city's new assistant chief of police, Chris Roberts, gestured at the two dozen highly trained agents in tactical gear and said, "There's a lot that goes into this. This isn't cheap."

There's no space in jail for people committing misdemeanors, which includes marijuana possession, according to Sheriff LaRue.

Since voters passed Proposition 64 in 2016, illegal cultivation is a misdemeanor. Violating the six-plant-per-person limit carries the same penalty, regardless of how many plants you have. And while the law is written to include jail time for certain cultivation, possession, and other crimes, most communities have neither the appetite nor the space to incarcerate people for marijuana offenses.

"The court system would not, in my opinion, be locking someone up for six months," Sheriff LaRue said, referring to the penalty for cultivating more than six plants.



Police officers guard the outside of an illegal marijuana home. John Fredricks/The Epoch Times

“The jails are so impacted in most communities, there is just no space for people committing misdemeanors. To be housed in jail for any substantive time, it needs to be serious or violent. And marijuana possession, even if it’s thousands of plants, is still a minor crime. It would never happen because it’s not viewed as serious enough,” he said.

Some municipalities appear to be more aggressive, as in the Kern County sheriff’s [recent raid](#) of a massive underground grow that seized 17,650 plants and resulted in the arrest of three Chinese nationals. And in some cases a state agency like Fish and Wildlife will serve a warrant that leads to felony [environmental crimes](#).

But that’s less likely to happen in the residential raids that tend to result in misdemeanor referrals to the district attorney, those familiar with the issue say.

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“If they’re not going to charge you for dealing drugs, why would they charge you for environmental crimes? Typically drugs are a higher priority,” Welch says.

He estimates L.A. County’s illegal marijuana trade is “90 percent unenforced—and that might actually be somewhat forgiving.”

Previously, he told The Epoch Times that also applies even when there are narcotics or guns involved at the locations. “I’ve seen enough of these cases to know they’re not being filed,” he said.

An inquiry to the L.A. County District Attorney’s Office requesting total referrals for cannabis-related crimes, filings, and rejections was not returned.

Linares said it’s far more common for offenders to get fined, or informal probation. “I have not seen any jail sentences for the misdemeanors.”

Lackey suggested the relaxed penalties are in part because of a misconception—a “‘70s marijuana attitude”—about what the illicit industry really is.

“Everybody thinks people in this business look like Zig-Zag,” he said. “No—these are white collar, brilliant people making billions and billions of dollars. Our system is not taking them seriously.”

The environmental destruction and impacts of pesticides are super toxic—everyone knows this, Lackey said. “Some of these illicit grows, law enforcement finds deceased animals all over the place. The residential impact, molds, cancer, fertility issues—all sorts of human threats. But they turn a blind eye because it’s weed.”

While fentanyl deserves to be “front and center,” he said, “we can walk and chew gum at the same time.”

Chinese Dominance

At scale, the two problems are inextricably linked.

The uneasy mix of crime syndicates running illicit marijuana in California, according to law enforcement officials, includes Chinese and Hmong groups, Mexican cartels and Latin American street gangs, and Chaldean and Armenian organizations.



San Bernardino County Sheriff's deputies review documents inside a home during a raid of an illegal cannabis farm in Newberry Springs, Calif., on March 29, 2024. Robyn Beck/AFP via Getty Images

While the DCC's Linares says these groups are not all working together, they maintain a kind of territorial detente.

But according to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Mexican cartels and Chinese groups continue to dominate the state's black market. And in recent years, federal investigations have unearthed how Chinese crime networks have risen to global prominence, in part by laundering cartel drug money.

Ray Donovan, the DEA's former chief of operations, has described how networks supplying fentanyl precursor chemicals to Mexican cartels were also laundering fentanyl money and reinvesting it in illicit marijuana. Testifying before the House's Select Committee on the CCP in April, he [outlined](#) how these groups operate with at least tacit support from the Chinese communist regime.

At a Senate drug caucus hearing later that month, William Kimbell, current chief of operations for the DEA, [said](#) his agency has found Chinese organizations have “taken over” marijuana cultivation in 23 states, some of which are “legitimate” but still staffed by people controlled by Chinese money laundering organizations.

A 2024 DEA [report](#) noted the recent uptick in the number of illicit grows linked to Chinese and other Asian organized crime groups, with “Asian investors” emerging as a new funding source of illegal marijuana production in the U.S.

“Asian drug trafficking organizations have been involved in illegal marijuana cultivation for decades, operating industrial-scale indoor marijuana grows in residential homes, primarily in the western United States,” the report states.

The federal government has kept its eye on California’s Central Valley, which stretches from the Sacramento Valley to the Tulare Basin; in 2017 more than 58 percent of 3.4 million marijuana plants the DEA [eradicated](#) in the United States were located in this region.

In 2018, an operation involving hundreds of federal and local agents raided 75 houses in the Sacramento area used for cultivation by Chinese drug traffickers, and filed civil forfeiture against more than 100 houses, making it one of the largest residential forfeitures in U.S. history.

In its announcement, the U.S. Justice Department said patterns had begun to emerge during years-long investigations of indoor grows in residential neighborhoods—including financing and distribution methods.

In 2019, a grand jury [indicted](#) six Chinese nationals on money laundering counts alleging they used funds from China to buy grow

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STATES

The DEA has found that Chinese organizations have “taken over” marijuana cultivation in 23 states.

houses in Sacramento and Placer counties.



A paramilitary policeman stands on guard on Tiananmen Square in Beijing on March 15, 2019. Drug networks tied to Mexican cartels are supported by the Chinese regime. Fred Dufour/AFP via Getty Images

‘It’s All Connected’

“The fentanyl, the money laundering, the marijuana grows—it’s all connected,” Leland Lazarus, associate director of national security at Florida International University’s Jack D. Gordon Institute for Public Policy, told The Epoch Times in an email.

These syndicates, Lazarus said, typically employ illegal Chinese migrants, who are often subjected to forced labor or criminality, terrible working conditions, and even sexual violence.

Sheriff LaRue pointed to an instantly recognizable structure—as if growers had been given a manual—at Chinese-led grows, which dominate Siskiyou County.

“They’re almost cookie-cutter, they all look the same. Even the houses are the same. It’s almost a prescribed thing: This is what you’re going to use, this is what you’re going to have,” the sheriff said. “You can almost go on a site and say, ‘This is Chinese.’”

Lazarus notes U.S. law enforcement agencies have been tracking “the vast Chinese money laundering networks” across 22 states for years, but the problem remains “a lack of significant resources, language skills and cultural knowledge to truly dismantle these networks.”

LaRue conducted a recent raid in which his team encountered 28 people onsite—all of them elderly women. “We couldn’t talk to any of them. One that spoke English, she was not about to let anyone open their mouth. That bothers me,” he said. “What is really going on there?”

The women were released from custody while LaRue’s office continues its investigation.

Some of Lazarus’s recent research has focused on the vast reach of these organizations, far beyond California grow houses, or even the East Coast, where federal authorities say they are anchored.

“Like other transnational criminal organizations, Chinese illegal gangs operate around the globe. You’re seeing some of the same illicit activities in Southeast Asia, Europe, and even Latin America,” Lazarus said.

“And it’s hard to imagine that China—which is the largest surveillance state in the world—isn’t aware of these activities. That’s why we need a truly international effort to deal with the scourge of global Chinese organized crime.”

Path Forward

In a 2013 [memorandum](#), then Deputy Attorney General James M. Cole outlined priorities for federal prosecutors in pursuing marijuana-related crimes, in large part deferring to state authority and taking a hands-off approach in jurisdictions that had legalized the drug.



U.S. Border Patrol agents stack more than 400 pounds of marijuana seized from drug smugglers after it was brought across the Rio Grande from Mexico into the United States, near Laredo, Texas, on Aug. 7, 2008. John Moore/Getty Images

Such guidance, Cole reasoned, relied on an expectation that those jurisdictions “will implement strong and effective regulatory and enforcement systems that will address the threat those state laws could pose to public safety, public health, and other law enforcement interests.”

To many working to contain the collateral fallout of California's illegal marijuana trade, that has not happened.

“The feds are hands-off on anything involving cannabis,” said Katz, while also pointing to a lack of appetite among local prosecutors. “My guess would be they’re a little gun-shy about jury nullification. ... A jury will be like, ‘Who cares? It’s just cannabis.’”

Lackey, the assembly member, is hopeful a DEA [proposal](#) to reclassify marijuana from a Schedule I drug to a Schedule III drug will loosen restrictions that, for example, prevent the legal market from using banks.

Meanwhile, he said, California needs to take the lead in stronger prosecution efforts and be able to mete out consequences.

“The reason we’re struggling in California is we’ve relaxed consequences, and of course that’s going to increase evasion and it’s going to create victims,” Lackey said. “It really has been a hurtful experience for me to have a front row seat to watch this mistake being made.”

For Katz and Morris, the key to navigating the no-man’s land between the state and the feds, between lax prosecution and the absence of a standardized mandate, remains collaboration.



A lot of cities are not investing that kind of effort into combatting this problem, so they don't even know what they don't know.

Mike Katz, code enforcement officer, Lancaster

Morris pointed to Riverside's creation of a roundtable bringing together 43 jurisdictions each quarter to discuss what agents are seeing on the ground.

"We found there were a lot of the same players, especially in our sister counties like San Bernardino. ... There's a lot of money in this, so they change tactics," she said. Learning how growers in Kern County were burying [shipping containers](#) to house grows, for example, helped Riverside stay ahead of the game, she said.

Katz says his department immerses itself in the issue, cross-training with other disciplines, attending Environmental Protection Agency trainings and medical conferences. In the absence of leadership, or a standard approach, they cobble it together.

"A lot of cities are not investing that kind of effort into combatting this problem, so they don't even know what they don't know," he said.

Ultimately, he says, the battle has nothing to do with the morality of cannabis—"that's not the war we're waging"—and everything to do with preventing a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry from sickening and killing residents.

"They don't care if the pesticides they apply in the house poisons a family. They don't care about the people who consume their contaminated cannabis. Money is all that matters to them.

"Only a sociopath would allow other human beings into buildings that might kill them. That's what we're combatting."

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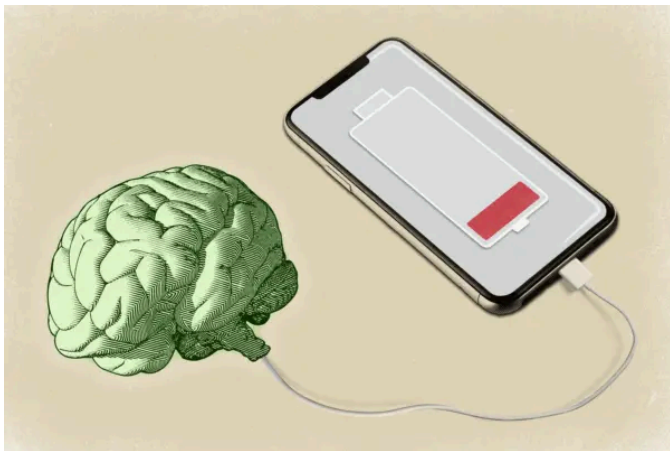
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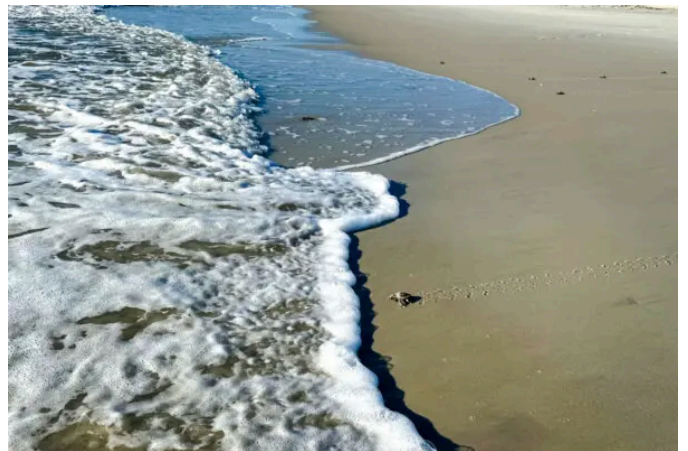
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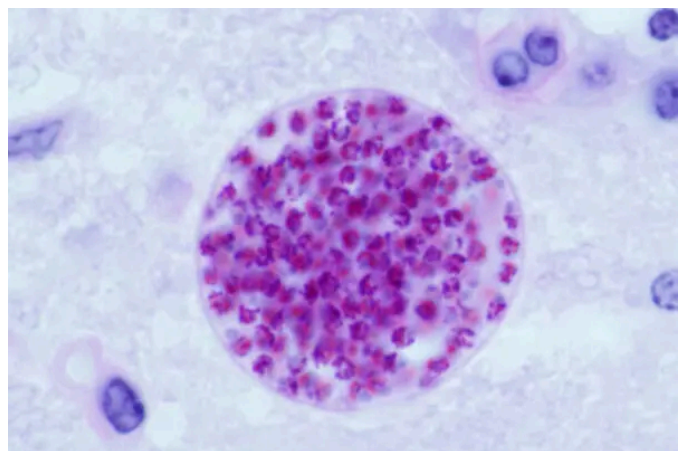
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