

The hidden cost of cannabis

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(Phys.org) -- Around £200m of electricity is being stolen every year to run illegal cannabis farms across the UK. Phil Butler, Co-Director of Newcastle University's Centre for Cybercrime and Computer Security (CCCS), says this would be enough electricity to provide free energy for every household in Newcastle for a whole year.

Now the Newcastle team are joining forces with key organisations to investigate ways in which cyber technology could be used to crackdown on the commercial cultivation of this class B drug.

“The cultivation of [cannabis](#) is happening on an industrial scale but at the moment the police are still very much reliant on intelligence and tip-offs,” explains Mr Butler, a former Detective Inspector with Northumbria Police.

“What we are trying to do is develop technologies that will enable us to take a more proactive approach in the fight against cannabis cultivation.”

Around 4,000 cannabis farms are discovered in the UK each year. Cannabis is the most widely used of all the illicit drugs in the UK, with just under 10 million adults (16 – 59 year olds) having used the drug.

The idea of growing cannabis indoors first emerged in the USA as a means of avoiding detection – naturally grown cannabis plants can reach several feet in height. Growing cannabis indoors without soil under powerful lights produces strains that have a higher concentration of THC, the active chemical in cannabis.

“The [electricity](#) costs associated with even a small-scale farm are astronomical,” explains Mr Butler. “To get around this, the individuals responsible find ways of siphoning off the electricity from the main source – often this literally means digging down underground outside the premises and hooking into the main supply.”

One of the solutions is a Smart metre which feeds back information in real time to the main grid. Remotely monitoring input and output, Mr Butler said it could detect ‘spikes’ on the grid where unexpectedly high levels of electricity were being withdrawn.

“Our work suggests the annual cost to the taxpayer in stolen electricity is around £200m which is staggering,” says Mr Butler.

“But it’s about more than money. These farms are essentially death traps. In one small space such as a loft or a garage you have all this electricity and gallons of water which is a lethal combination.”

To launch the new initiative, a two-day conference is being held in Newcastle which will bring together individuals and organisations who have a key role to play in combating the problem of cannabis cultivation including the Home Office, ACPO, regional fire and police services and energy companies.

Provided by Newcastle University

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