

Medical marijuana outlets not linked to crime

(July 2012)

PISCATAWAY, NJ – Despite some concerns to the contrary, neighborhoods with medical marijuana dispensaries may not have higher crime rates than other neighborhoods—at least in one California city.

That’s the conclusion of a new study in the July issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*. Researchers found that, across Sacramento neighborhoods, there was no evidence that having a higher density of medical marijuana dispensaries was related to higher rates of violent crime or property crime.

As more U.S. states have legalized the use of marijuana for medical reasons, there have been growing concerns that the dispensaries that sell the drug—and the people who go there—will become targets for crime.

“The reality is, we haven’t had any evidence to support those claims,” said Nancy J. Kepple, M.S.W., a researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles, who led the new study.

Kepple and her colleague, Bridget Freisthler, Ph.D., looked at violent and property crime rates and the density of medical marijuana outlets in 95 different areas of Sacramento in 2009. Not surprisingly, commercial districts and neighborhoods with high unemployment rates tended to have more property crime and violent crime. But there was no correlation between crime and the concentration of medical marijuana outlets.

“This conclusion suggests that we should further question whether medical marijuana dispensaries are related to crime,” Kepple said.

But, she stressed, the study is far from the final word. The researchers looked at neighborhoods at only one point in time. So it’s not clear whether a neighborhood’s crime patterns might change over time, after more medical marijuana dispensaries are opened.

“This study is a good first step,” Kepple said. “But it was not designed to address the bigger picture of how these dispensaries might be affecting neighborhoods.”

In addition, the findings are based on one city, and other cities might have different experiences. Right now, 17 U.S. states and the District of Columbia allow medical marijuana use.

Kepple said that further studies in other cities, and studies that follow crime rates over time, would help. “The more research that’s done, the more complete a picture we’ll have.”

It would also be good to know why, at least in this study, medical marijuana outlets were not linked to crime rates, according to Kepple.

Does, for example, a dispensary’s level of security matter? In this study, information on outlets’ security measures was not incorporated. Therefore, it is not possible to tell how those might have factored in. Future studies, Kepple said, should look at whether strong security systems seem to deter crime.

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Kepple, N. J., & Freisthler, B. (July 2012). Exploring the ecological association between crime and medical marijuana dispensaries. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 73(4), 523–530.

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Available at: www.jsad.com/jsad/link/73/523

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The *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (www.jsad.com) is published by the Center of Alcohol Studies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. It is the oldest substance-abuse journal published in the United States.