

# “GROWBUSTERS”

AN

ALTERNATIVE



P.O.P.

PROJECT

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## Executive Summary

### Scanning

In 1999 it was estimated there were between 4,000 and 7,000 marihuana grow operations in the City of Vancouver. This proliferation (particularly in District Three, the Southeast quadrant of the City) presented our community with a serious safety issue because of fire hazards and the violence associated with organized criminal operations. Due to personnel and legal constraints the Drug Squad was not able to keep up with the increase in grow ops and the community was concerned, upset and frightened. In November 1999 police members now known as "Growbusters" identified the situation as a significant community problem and set about to address it.

### Analysis

The problem had developed crisis proportions for two reasons. The traditional police response of taking almost every marihuana cultivation to court was (and is) a slow, laborious, time-consuming process. Even successful prosecutions resulted in little deterrence (typical sentences were \$3,000 fines for cultivations worth approximately \$300,000). Enormous police resources were concentrated in an effort that was only the cost of doing business in the eyes of drug dealers. Grow operations opened far faster than police could close them.

The other aspect of the problem was the rental property issue. The vast majority (99%) of marihuana cultivations occur in rental houses. Landlords were either unaware of what was occurring on their property or were wilfully blind because of the higher-than-average rent often paid well in advance. A further problem was the fact that growers were almost always released on bail after being charged and there was nothing stopping them from returning to the house and re-establishing a grow op.

It was clear to the police officers that to deal with this problem, they had to develop a much more streamlined, efficient response and they had to tackle the availability of properties for the grow operators.

## Response

After consulting with the Vancouver Fire Department, BC Hydro, City Legal and City electrical inspectors, the "Growbusters" developed a protocol to close grow operations in a safe and efficient manner. A sergeant and five constables obtained search warrants and executed them in the company of a fire inspector, city electrical inspectors and BC Hydro. The fire inspector dealt with hazardous materials and noxious substances; the electrical inspectors disconnected the electrical supply and rendered the equipment safe; and BC Hydro disconnected the power and gas and locked off the meters. The police officers seized lamps and marijuana plants and completed all required reports. The property was posted as "unsafe to occupy" and City Permits and Licensing followed up with the owner. The landlord could not re-rent the property until it was repaired to meet current building code standards.

The Team also assisted the Collingwood Community Policing Centre in the development of a safety pamphlet and two PowerPoint presentations, designed to educate property owners, the community and service providers about the safety and health hazards of grow operations and ways to avoid renting to growers.

The project was conducted infrequently from December 1999 to June 2000 as a pilot project. In July 2000 it was authorized by the Department and began full-time.

## Assessment

To date, the Team has executed 344 warrants on illegal grow operations and seized \$60,000,000 worth of marijuana plants. They have also seized equipment valued at \$2,600,000 and over \$165,000 in cash. This is four times the number of grows that would have been shut down using the traditional response.

Significantly, only one of the properties closed by the Growbusters has reopened as a grow operation. There are numerous anecdotes about the overwhelmingly positive responses from citizens when they saw the Growbusters in action. All in all, the community is our best judge.

## **Scanning**

Vancouver, British Columbia is a vibrant Canadian West Coast seaport. As such, it has many of the problems associated with a cosmopolitan urban area. Not the least of these relates to a burgeoning illicit drug trade involving heroin, cocaine, amphetamines and marihuana. During the 60's and 70's the better grades of marihuana were often imported, but it was during this time that local entrepreneurs began to make efforts at large scale cultivation. These however did not always prosper. An uncooperative climate, inordinate fertilization expenses and concealment difficulties hindered successful harvests. Overall, the situation did not change much until advances regarding indoor plant cultivation were made. Of course, these advances were applied to the indoor cultivation of cannabis.

By the mid to late-90's the presence of indoor grow operations increasingly came to the attention of law enforcement. Citizens had become much more fearful due to their perception of the violence often associated with the drug culture. They were afraid of fires, explosions and drug dealers arriving at the wrong addresses. They also felt very strongly that their sense of community was eroding. Unfamiliar neighbours and suspicious activities created feelings of isolation where once people felt they 'belonged'. At first, the scope of the cultivation was not fully recognized. Reports of suspicious circumstances did not, per se, prove drug activity. Nevertheless, by 1999 it was apparent that a proliferation of well-organized grow operations had hit the City. (Refer to Appendix A, C)

Sometimes the Vancouver Police inadvertently discovered grow-ops but, more often than not, the Department's community policing centres received information from concerned citizens. Typically such reports detailed unusual activities in rental houses. Residents were rarely seen; blinds and shades were always drawn; unusual noises and odours were present; and houses were falling into disrepair. Reports through the Community Policing Centres and through the Crimestoppers Program increased

alarmingly. Although no area of the City seemed immune, more grow-ops were reported on the City's East Side where, generally, more rental properties were available.

Not only were citizens complaining about grow operations in ever larger numbers but they were also voicing increasing frustration and despair over what they saw as a lack of police response. The Collingwood Community Policing Centre, located in the heart of the marihuana growing area, became the flash point. Most of the complaints came in to that office and the officers working from the Centre could not ignore the volume of or the frustration accompanying these complaints. It was clear to Sergeant Tom Cork and Constables Jim Fiddler, Paul Gagnon, Mike Linde, Kirk Miles and Jay Osborne that something had to be done.

### **Analysis**

The officers were able to identify certain commonalities regarding the phenomenon. The houses containing the operations were invariably rented; the renters often did not reside in the houses; and the cultivators regularly employed people to watch over the crop. Disturbingly, the operations were often set up along cultural lines, with poor immigrant families acting as caretakers. The upshot was that the activity not only victimized a neighbourhood but also the caretaker families, especially their children who were forced to endure hazardous conditions within these houses. Often children were used to water the plants. The motive for these operations was profit, nothing more, nothing less.

Historically, the police response to a grow-operation was to put the complaint on a priority list. In due time, usually three to six months, an investigation of the tip would commence. Once information sufficient for a warrant had been gathered and a warrant obtained, the Drug Squad conducted a raid. The operation was closed, plants and equipment were seized and the house occupants charged with cultivation. To properly conclude a grow-op criminal investigation, the Drug Squad had to ensure that a myriad of complex, stringent evidentiary requirements was satisfied. Each case required forensic examination, careful cataloguing of seized property and thorough, lengthy

reports. The process was laborious, usually tedious, and most certainly expensive. It was then repeated with the next location, and the one after that, and the one after that. The net result was two or three busts per week. Sometimes the police hit the same house repeatedly because there was nothing preventing the drug cultivators from returning to the premise.

Moreover, criminal convictions did not guarantee punishments that could be deemed as deterrents. On average, the penalty for marihuana cultivation was a \$3,000 fine. A jail sentence was a rarity. Many times the convicted offenders were immigrants with young families. Obviously the incarceration of such people was not in the public interest. Unfortunately the real culprits remained hidden, almost always safe from prosecution. That the system did not work was readily apparent. Ironically, more than one convicted offender was heard to comment on the weakness of the system.

The community was becoming extremely frustrated over what they perceived as a lack of police response. While the police laboured with the onerous legal requirements, the community became more and more vocal, demanding immediate and permanent action. They simply wanted the grow ops out of their neighbourhood.

BC Hydro had also become victim to the proliferation of grow operations due to the illegal diversion of electricity. They too were demanding a more efficient police response to stop the thefts and recover costs.

Further analysis revealed that grow operations were well organized from site location through harvesting and distribution. Police intelligence indicated that much of the crop was exported to the United States in return for cocaine. Furthermore, the overall exportation and importation pointed to the involvement of outlaw motorcycle gangs. It was clear that the number of grow operations was not only not diminishing, but it was increasing at an alarming rate. Criminal charges seemed to have little effect. It was also clear that the profits involved encouraged proliferation, to the point that the police

had become overwhelmed. The police needed another strategy, one that was less cumbersome, more efficient and responded to the community's needs.

The police considered the use of City by-laws but there was no effective by-law that could be focused on landlords to dissuade them from renting to cultivators. Commonly, landlords expressed ignorance of illegality, even when they repeatedly rented to cultivators who had been criminally prosecuted.

A second possible strategy involved an increase in staff for the Drug Squad. This idea was not novel, nor was it financially sound. An increase in staff inevitably led to an increase in prosecutions. In turn, costs increased as cases proceeded through the courts. Given that sentences offered little deterrence, an increase in staffing seemed like a short sighted panacea, one that did little to assuage the overall problem.

Targeting key players was always an option. When one considered the profits to be had, this concept showed itself to be flawed. The elimination of one player resulted in a timely replacement who, like his predecessor, was drawn by the monetary rewards.

Another idea that was considered was using the Fire Services Act, which provided authority to enter premises where a serious fire hazard existed. This would eliminate the time involved in obtaining grounds for a search warrant, however the Act did not give police the authority to seize property.

On the face of it, the police had reached an impasse. Traditional methodology had done little to correct the situation. If anything, the typical police strategy/tactics tended to exacerbate the problem. What was needed was a unique approach that addressed all issues that had been raised.



## Response

The six police officers recognized that the number of drug raids had to be increased significantly both to provide a more timely response to citizen complaints and to eliminate larger numbers of valuable crops. If profit was their motive, then denial of profit was the weapon most likely to be successful. So, they searched for ways to streamline the process. Through numerous meetings with the Fire Department, BC Hydro and BC Gas representatives, City lawyers, City electrical inspectors and Permits and Licensing a process evolved.

A tips line was established and publicized where concerned citizens could call in (anonymously, if they wished) to report suspicious premises. The line was given priority and police attended those address first to verify the grow operation and obtain grounds for a search warrant. These were done in geographical “bunches” to minimize travel time. Also, if the necessary information could not be easily obtained police notified the City, which, in turn, contacted the landlords to advise them of the suspicious activity.

A Team comprising police officers, City electrical inspectors, a BC Hydro representative and a Fire Inspector executed the search warrants. The police entered the premise, ensured there were no threats due to persons and/or weapons, seized the plants and confiscated the expensive, high-intensity lamps.

The electrical inspectors dealt with the electrical hazards and rendered the remaining equipment safe. The Fire inspector removed any hazardous or noxious substances (frequently chemicals and gas containers) and BC Hydro severed the services to the house, including electricity and gas. The house was declared unsafe to inhabit because of numerous building code infractions, not the least of which was dangerous electrical bypasses. The owner was then contacted and required to repair the house to meet current building codes. (Refer to Appendix I, J) Only after repairs were made and the house inspected would the City allow services to be fully restored. The result, of

course, was that even if the grow operators were not criminally charged (or were released on bail) they could not return to the premise and begin another cultivation.

An unusual aspect of the warrant executions was that they were conducted in a high profile manner. (Refer to Appendix E) All police officers were in uniform and attended the addresses in marked police cars. A sandwich board sign was placed in front of the premise to advertise to the neighbourhood that a grow operation was being eliminated. The primary reason for this strategy was officer safety, but another important reason was to inform neighbourhoods of the police response to their complaints. A side effect was that even more information about other grows in the neighbourhood was forthcoming. Citizens typically watched the police activities for a time, then they would approach an officer and volunteer details about other suspicious houses.

Strict criteria were established to determine when Criminal charges were appropriate. If the grow operation was large, clean, sophisticated and there was an individual found in the premise with access, then charges were fitting and the Drug Squad was called in to complete the investigation. The police officers on the team were not tied up constructing lengthy reports and were not involved in protracted court proceedings. Instead, the team continued to the next location where they, once again repeated the process. This resulted in quadrupling the number of grow operations closed each week.

Finally, the landlords needed to be educated about the problems of renting to grow operators and the potential for damage that inevitably resulted in costly repairs. (Refer to Appendix B) The Collingwood Community Policing Centre raised funds to produce an educational pamphlet (in English and Cantonese) and prepared a power point presentation for property owners showing ways landlords can protect themselves. (Refer to Appendix L)

Another hazard the police encountered was the apparent health risk posed to people who live in grow operations. (Refer to Appendix D) They observed large quantities of mould in grow houses and they discovered unusual numbers of medical remedies and

apparatus for respiratory ailments. Medical experts were consulted and they confirmed the dangers. There was obviously a need to educate the public and service providers about the health hazards of grow operations. Another power point presentation was prepared for service providers such as teachers, health care workers and child protection workers. Funds are currently being sought to print the material in other languages.

The plan, which encompassed a unique partnership, began as a pilot project in December 1999. The police officers remained assigned to their regular duties and set aside occasional "warrant" days where the entire Team assembled and was able to execute as many as five warrants in two days.

In July 2000 the Department formally authorized the Team and the officers were assigned to "Growbusters" duties full time.

The entire process was designed to permanently shut down the operations make neighbourhoods safer for citizens. It was decided that success would be determined by two criteria: the number of operations taken down and the satisfaction reported by citizens in neighbourhoods that had been impacted by grow operations. (Refer to Appendix K)

### **Assessment**

The assessment of the program has proved interesting. To date (April 5, 2001) the "Growbusters" Team has conducted 342 raids. (Refer to Appendix F) Under the traditional method of dealing with grow operations it would have taken three years to obtain the same results. All the 342 resulted in the discovery of a significant grow operation with a large number of plants and equipment. The largest seizure involved some 1,000 plants that had a street value of approximately \$1,000,000. All in all, plant seizures to date total \$63,500,000. Confiscated equipment seizures have a rough value of \$2.8 million, not an insignificant sum. Valuable intelligence including photographs of offenders have

been forwarded to other police agencies including United States Customs and the D.E.A.

By the end of this year, Growbusters expect to have executed approximately 700 warrants and seized \$130 million in marihuana plants. While the number is significant, its significance decreases when compared with the size of the overall problem (an estimated 7,000 grow operations exist in the City).

Plans are currently under discussion to increase the size of the Team, and consequently the response to the problem. If the program is to succeed in driving grow operators out of the City, it is believed they must face a 25% likelihood of losing their crops rather than the 10% possibility they now face (or the 3% chance they faced prior to the implementation of the program). A report will be presented to City Council at the end of April requesting approval of the increase in the size of the Team. This will result in an increase in the fees paid by landlords for property inspections and service re-connections as it is important that the program is self-sustaining.

Although one would like to think that the "Growbusters" operation has been without problems, this has not been the case. The Team is still faced with the same number of locations that plagued the Drug Squad. At any time the Team has a list of approximately 60 addresses that are either confirmed cultivations or are suspicious. The vexing issue concerning priorities i.e. which locations come first, continues to be problematic.

Also, because there were no extra funds available for the new Team, the procurement of specialized protective equipment was somewhat problematic. This, however, has been overcome as officer safety issues in Vancouver preclude strict financial constraints.

Further, the Team finds itself repeatedly meeting the same "caretakers" who are drawn by the huge profits. This was not completely unexpected given the lack of fear of court-

imposed sanctions but it is a frustration that remains unresolved. Whatever the case, Growbusters has brought a different perspective encompassing an innovative approach to the illicit cultivation of marijuana. The amalgam of police, city officials, Hydro and gas employees and community was a dramatic first for the City.

Of course, a central concern in most problem oriented policing problems relates to displacement. In this case displacement cannot be viewed within the usual context. It is axiomatic that grow operations metastasise throughout the community. The disease is dependent on finding a suitable and willing host i.e. a rental house, which is not subjected to close scrutiny by a responsible landlord. Initially, there was seemingly no shortage of apathetic landlords within the City. When one grow operation was shut down, the principals invariably moved to another rental house. There was the inevitability of multiple tumours with this type of operation. The stepped-up number of drug raids, the "unserved" rental houses and increasing landlord awareness took care of displacement within the City. Police officials in neighbouring jurisdictions were initially alarmed at the displacement potential for their cities. Now however they are showing an inclination to deal with grow-ops utilizing methods similar to that of Growbusters. Interestingly, word of Growbusters' success seems to have travelled south. Enquiries about the program have been received from as far as New York and Florida.

To measure citizen satisfaction a survey was developed by the Neighbourhood Police Officer assigned to the Collingwood Community Policing Centre. (Refer to Appendix H) The purpose was to determine the impact grow operations had had on people and their sense of security and what impact the "Growbusters" program has had in enhancing (or not) that sense of security. The survey began only two months ago and will be on-going for some time, however, early results suggest the impact of the project is very positive.

One may rightly enquire as to the expected term of the project. Certainly it was envisioned that the "Growbuster" program had to be long term to cause financial harm to the principals. The "Growbusters" program clearly demonstrates efficiency of

problem oriented policing. As, well, it is clear that programs, designed to deal with complex problems, need not be unduly complex. The “Growbusters” approach to grow-ops is a realistic one. It recognized the paucity of police resources, the complexities of criminal prosecutions and the victimization of neighbourhoods. Moreover, the officers involved in the program were acutely aware of constraints with respect to the law, ethical principles and public perceptions.

Some critics of the program repeatedly point to the reduction in criminal prosecutions, others demand that marihuana be decriminalized or legalized. In turn, this is part of a larger issue, the merits of which ought to be decided at the legislative level.

Interestingly enough, the Canadian Supreme Court has decided to review the issue relating to marihuana. In the meantime, “Growbusters” will continue its efforts to minimize the damage brought by grow-ops.

### **Agency and Officer Information**

The Vancouver Police Department has been involved with Problem Oriented Policing since 1993 and all members have received training in the use of the model. This initiative was developed by a group of six officers at the street level, not because they were tasked with developing a POP project, nor because of incentives (there were none). Rather it was developed because they were genuinely concerned about the magnitude of the problem and its effects on the community. The Executive of the Department has endorsed the program and the team has received a Unit Citation for their successful efforts. Discussions are now underway regarding expansion of the program.

The biggest difficulty encountered was the resistance to change by other officers. Cultivation of marihuana had always been seen as a crime problem, not a community safety problem. The shift in focus, away from criminal prosecution and toward health and safety issues, brought about by this project resulted in criticism from some areas of our organization. Much of this criticism has been allayed by the success of the project,

as people see that prosecutions are still being pursued and the number of raids has increased dramatically.

The Police Department committed six officers and the Fire Department provided one safety inspector for the initiative. Those resources came from within existing budgets. Revenue from an increase in permit and inspection fees relating to grow operations has covered the cost of additional electrical inspectors and Permits and Licensing staff at City Hall. Protective equipment (coveralls and respiratory masks) for the Team has been the only extra cost for the project.

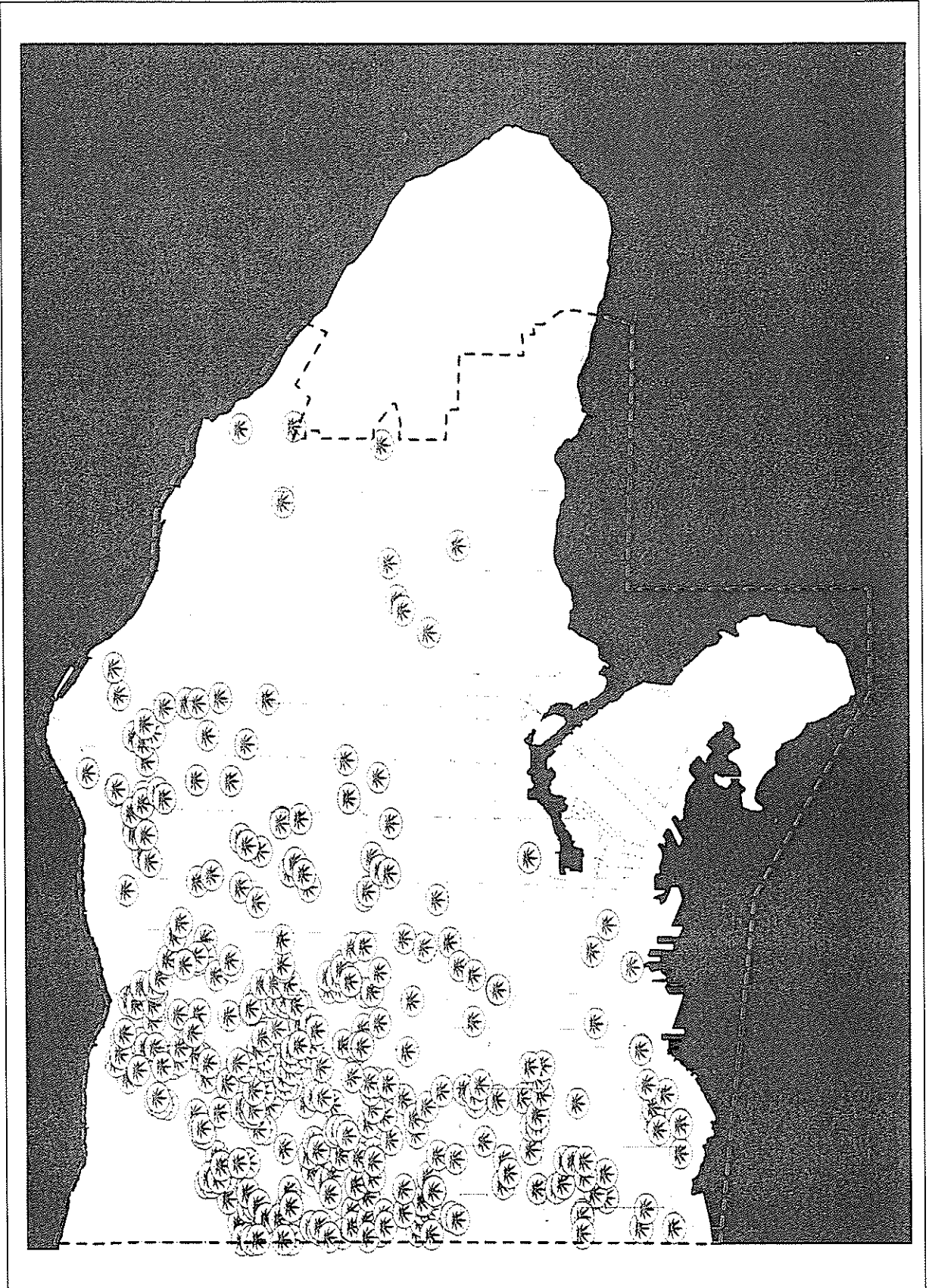
**Contact Persons:**

**Tom Cork, Sergeant, Growbusters**  
**Vancouver Police Department**  
**2120 Cambie Street**  
**Vancouver, BC**  
**V5Z 4N6**  
**(604) 717-3456 (ph)**  
**(640) 717- 2817 (fax)**  
**PDTCork@vpd.city.vancouver.bc.ca**

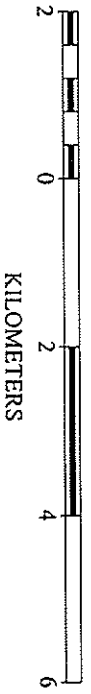
**Valerie Harrison, Inspector, District 3**  
**Vancouver Police Department**  
**2120 Cambie Street**  
**Vancouver, BC**  
**V5Z 4N6**  
**(604) 717-3166 (ph)**  
**(604) 717-2817 (fax)**  
**PDVHarrison@vpd.city.vancouver.bc.ca**

# APPENDIX C

- City Boundary
- Reference Streets
- ⊗ Grow Operations



SCALE 1 : 89,827



KILOMETERS



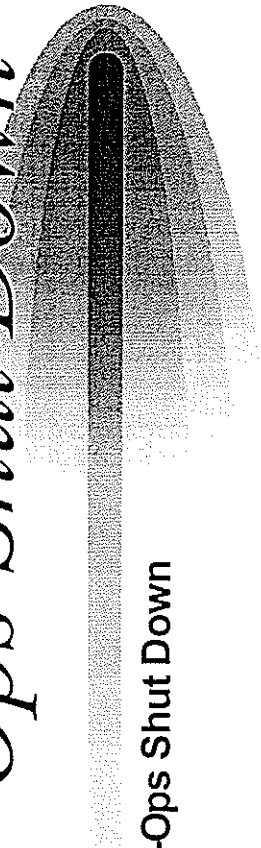


## APPENDIX F

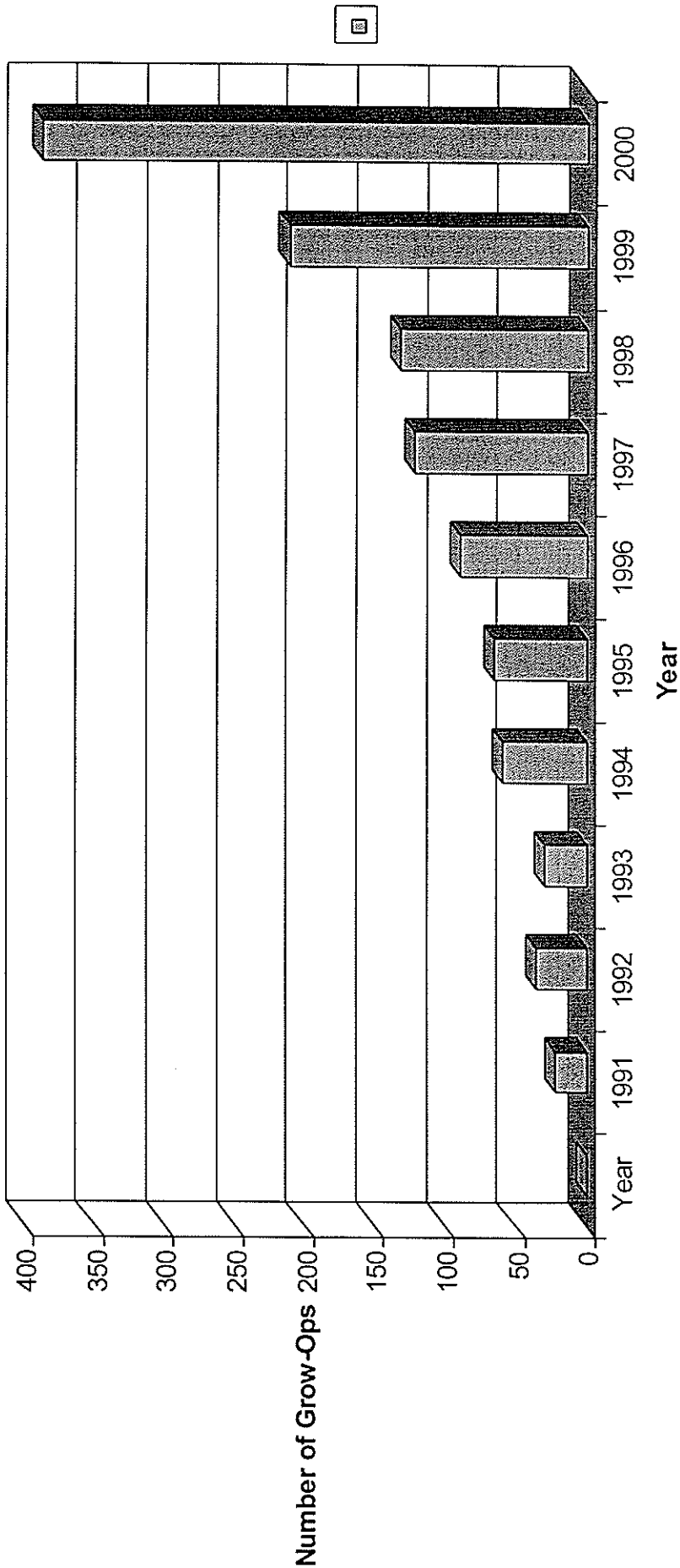
### Statistics for the "Growbusters" Team

	2000	YTD	Total
<b>Grow Operations</b>	203	139	342
<b>Marihuana</b>	\$31.3 M	\$32.2 M	\$63.5 M
<b>Equipment</b>	\$1.6 M	\$1.2 M	\$2.8 M
<b>Cash</b>	\$118,525	\$54,441	\$172,996

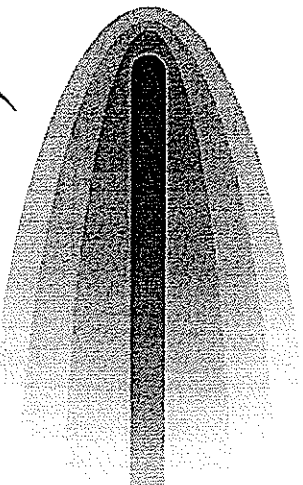
# Number of Grow-Ops Shut Down



Number of Grow-Ops Shut Down



# Monetary Value of Crops Seized (1991-2000)



Monetary Value of Crops Seized (1991-2000)

