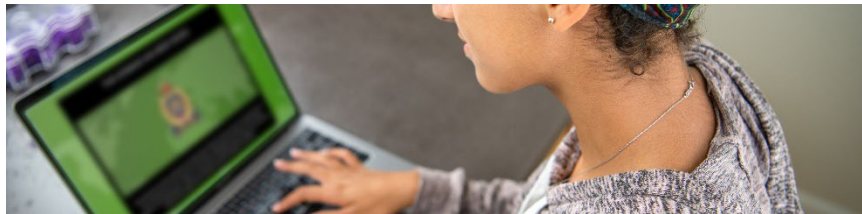




Online Illicit Cannabis Sales Fact Sheet Edmonton Police Service



Issue

Throughout 2019, the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) observed a large number of illicit cannabis shipments coming into the city. In an attempt to curb the illicit cannabis market, they started tracing seized illicit cannabis shipments back to websites that were illegally selling, distributing or promoting recreational cannabis products in contravention of the federal *Cannabis Act* and seizing the illegal website domain names.

Background

Funded by the City of Edmonton, the Edmonton Drug and Gang Enforcement (EDGE) Unit of the EPS currently has two police officers dedicated to cannabis investigations with a mandate to work on cannabis-related issues, including online illicit cannabis sales.

In 2019, EPS officers were part of several investigations where packages containing illicit cannabis were intercepted by Canada Post prior to delivery. **From June to December 2019, the EPS seized approximately \$825,000 in illicit cannabis shipments from one Canada Post facility. The majority of these shipments originated in British Columbia.**

Inside the illicit packages, police officers found stickers, invoices and other documentation revealing that the primary source of these illicit

Public Safety Canada in collaboration with its federal/provincial/territorial (FPT) partners has developed a Short-Term Action Plan (Action Plan) to disrupt online illicit cannabis sales. The Action Plan focuses on five areas of intervention including increase in information sharing and collaborative approaches among partners; enhancing information resources to support enforcement of cannabis legislation and regulations; enhancing data collection and monitoring; outreach with search engines, social media platforms, website registries and payment platform; and enhancing education and awareness for consumers. This fact sheet is an example of the information resources being developed to highlight the promising practices taken by law enforcement agencies in addressing online illicit cannabis sales.

shipments was online websites which were accessible to the public and promoting their products to potential buyers. The owners of these illicit websites were openly selling and promoting their products and featuring misleading information to buyers that suggested that they were legal sellers.

Approach

In January 2020, the EPS started a unique approach to cannabis law enforcement by seizing the domain names of websites illegally selling cannabis products combined with a public education media campaign to make the public aware of the proper way to purchase cannabis legally and safely.

The following technique is used to seize illicit websites:

1. **Manually compiling a list of .CA website domains** through Google search engine which were responsible for illicit cannabis shipments, and reviewing the content of each website.
2. **Once confirmed that the website was in contravention of the *Cannabis Act***, collecting images in the event the owners attempted to hide the content upon notification of the visit.
3. **Setting up domain servers for seizures.**
4. Completing the Information for Obtaining General Warrant form requesting that the **General Warrant be executed to temporarily seize control of the domains**. Both warrants stipulate the offences that are believed to have been committed as well as the details of the investigation.
5. **Sending the General Warrant to the Canadian Internet Registry Authority (CIRA)**, an organization that manages the .CA domain names, requesting that they change the domain name servers (DNS) records for the identified domains to a website controlled by the EPS for the specified duration while further evidence can be gathered of the noted offences.
6. The **process is repeated** once new domain names are discovered.

Technique

Compile a list of .CA website domains

Confirm contraventions (screenshots)

Setup domain servers for seizure

Obtain General Warrant for CIRA

Rinse and Repeat

Seized Website Message

On the website controlled by the police, a message is displayed outlining that the domain names have been seized by the EPS and asking any visitors to come forward with any information regarding the activity of the respective domain name related to the distribution, selling or promotion of cannabis. In doing so, the EPS is looking to identify witnesses who may have ordered from or communicated with the owners of these websites, and obtain additional evidence to support the offences.

This technique does not give the EPS access to the current website host or its content, nor access to the account associated with each domain. This technique simply redirects the domain from the current website hosting service to a website host with display content controlled by police.



Image: Screenshot of a seized website message stating "This domain has been seized"

Communication Campaign

In addition to seizing the domain names, the EPS has launched an online advertising campaign to help educate the public about illegal websites. This includes a picture of a fake cannabis package posted on the EPS website and social media platforms. The ad warns citizens that websites selling recreational cannabis are often illegal, and directs them to information about how to buy cannabis safely online.

Challenges

A significant amount of time is required to manually document a large list of illicit websites. Given limited resources and the need to address other cannabis-related issues, only one percent of their time is dedicated to issues related to the online illicit sales.

There are technological challenges in preparing for the large volume of domains to be redirected without it being cumbersome for the registrar or future investigations.



Image: online advertisement about illegal websites. This includes a picture of a fake cannabis package posted on the EPS website and social media

Results

Between January and April 2020, the EPS seized 104 domains of illicit websites. Although approximately 20 per cent of these websites reopened their websites using new domain names, the EPS intent is to disrupt the illicit cannabis activities online and get the message out that police can seize these websites. At the same time, the EPS is taking the opportunity to educate members of the public who may not be aware that these websites are illegal.

A number of witnesses came forward after visiting the illicit websites seized by the police, expressing their concerns and indicating that the illicit websites should be held accountable.

Next Steps

Moving forward, the EPS plans on targeting specific Edmonton-based websites and laying charges on owners to show the public that offenders are being held accountable for selling illicit cannabis online. They are still at a very early stage in this process, but they are working closely with their legal counsel to determine the best way to proceed.

Other steps being explored include:

- Potential for financial record tracking for charges related to identified e-transfer address
- Utilize a software that will automatically crawl the Internet and identify potential illicit websites
- Explore possibility for controlled deliveries and surveillance of high volume recipients
- Create and build relationships to implement similar illicit package processes with other shipping providers

Lessons Learned

Being creative is key to achieving results. The owners of the illicit cannabis websites are becoming increasingly agile, sophisticated, and technologically savvy and law enforcement needs to adapt their approaches accordingly.

More than 100
website addresses
were seized
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and April 2020

Overview of the Cannabis Legislation in Alberta

In Alberta, the Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis website albertacannabis.org is the only legal online retailer of recreational cannabis in the province. Recreational cannabis purchased from outside of Alberta is not legal cannabis.

A list of legal cannabis retailers in Alberta can be found here:
<https://aglc.ca/cannabis/retail-cannabis/cannabis-licensee-search>

Under the provincial *Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act*, a business convicted of selling cannabis without a license is liable to a fine up to \$50,000, and individuals involved in the sale of illegal cannabis can be fined up to \$10,000 and/or face imprisonment up to six months.

Under the federal *Cannabis Act*, individuals selling or distributing illicit cannabis face up to 14 years imprisonment, and individuals in possession of illicit cannabis face imprisonment of up to five years or a fine of up to \$5,000.

Contact

For more information about the EPS techniques to address online illicit cannabis sales please contact:

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The Alberta Gaming,
Liquor and Cannabis
website

albertacannabis.org

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