

Lax laws help spur marijuana boom

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By age 16, Jeremy █████ craved smoking marijuana more than eating, sleeping, being with family - and sometimes, even survival.

"It was the numb feeling I got. I loved it," █████ said. "It got to the point where I needed it mentally and maybe physically."

He stole for it, risked his life with armed drug dealers, got tossed out of his parents' house and dropped out of Amelia High School.

Now 18, █████ has kicked drugs and counsels other teens in the Kids Helping Kids program, a long-term treatment program in Milford. He finally turned away from drugs - after first smoking marijuana at age 12 - when he started lacing marijuana with other harder drugs.

Drug officers say marijuana cultivation and use are skyrocketing because profits and demand are high and laws on the books are not tough enough.

"Most people, especially children, look at marijuana as a soft drug and (think) that it won't addict them," said Lt. Michael Howard, commander of Cincinnati's Operation Street Corner drug unit.

But Howard said major drug dealers are involved in marijuana growing and selling. Earlier this week, the unit arrested a man and confiscated 6 1/2 pounds of marijuana.

"We didn't think he was a big dealer; then we found \$97,000 in cash," Howard said.

In Hamilton County this year, more than 1,000 marijuana plants have been confiscated compared to about 60 this time last year.

In Kentucky, authorities have destroyed more than 250,000 plants so far this year; half that amount was eradicated this time last year. Authorities say they have stepped up enforcement but believe marijuana cultivation is soaring. Kentucky's tobacco crop is worth about \$900 million a year, but an estimated \$2.5 billion in marijuana is grown annually without detection.

"We've seen a trend lately of more marijuana use and more seizures," Howard said.

Since Street Corner began operating in 1989, 1,220 pounds of marijuana have been confiscated. But since January, the unit has confiscated 200 pounds of pot. "We arrest people for possession (of marijuana) every night. But we have people bringing in marijuana by the truckloads - 100 pounds at a time," he said.

Howard said "it's like a traffic ticket if you get caught. You don't get arrested and there's no jail time."

By contrast, he said, a drunken-driving conviction carries a tougher penalty with possible jail time and required classes. Penny Walker, executive director of Kids Helping Kids, said most youths enter the program after seriously abusing alcohol and marijuana. She has heard most youths say they can get marijuana easier than alcohol. Those who deal marijuana are organized and dangerous, Howard said. "I'd say 90 percent of the time weapons are involved." More than once, █████ remembers spotting guns in a dealer's home.

"I had no fears then. I just wanted to know the people who sold," he said.

But rehabilitation has instilled "a healthy fear" in █████.

"I know what's out there if I were to relapse. There's nothing out there that can stop someone from using drugs. It's up to the individual," he said.

"You decide that you either die, go to jail or get into recovery."

Text of fax box follows:

Risks involved

Few users grow their own marijuana. If caught growing marijuana or dealing it, the offense - a felony - carries a penalty of up to 5 years in prison. By contrast, possession of marijuana in Ohio is a minor misdemeanor and carries only a fine of up to \$120.

So far this year, 395 people have been arrested in Kentucky for growing marijuana, more than triple the 124 arrested last year at this point.

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