

Faces of pot: The police officer

Plenty has changed since Randy Franks joined the Toronto Police Force in the 1970s, mostly it's the quantity of marijuana discovered in a drug bust.

By: Isabel Teotonio Living reporter, Published on Mon Jan 13 2014

Three joints tucked into a cigarette pack. That was a serious offence back in 1979 when Officer Randy Franks was a rookie cop. It was also his first marijuana bust.

Today, Franks heads up Toronto's drug squad and oversees seizures involving thousands of marijuana plants. "Police are now focused on the bigger fish in the pond," says the staff inspector who's been on the force for 36 years.

"We're looking for people who are producing, importing, growing, distributing, and trafficking. ... One or two plants barely come to our attention."

Marijuana is big business and makes up about 25 per cent of drug investigations by the 120-officer unit.

Illegal grow-ops run by organized crime are hidden in industrial parks and neighbourhoods across the GTA, feeding the cycle of drugs, guns and violence. Many are linked to kidnappings and murders, perpetrated by rivals in the illegal drug trade, says Franks.

Police don't know how many illegal — or legal for that matter — marijuana grow-ops there are in Toronto or how much marijuana is produced. They bust about 100 each year.

Much of what they don't find is exported to the United States in exchange for cocaine and guns.

Some busts haul in hundreds of plants from home grows, while others involve thousands found in industrial storage units.

What infuriates Franks most about these illegal grows, which started popping up in Ontario during the mid-1990s, is that innocent people can unwittingly get caught up in the violence.

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“It absolutely makes me angry.”

He recalls one night in 2005, when he was in the organized crime unit, that a quiet Scarborough street, lined with two-storey family homes on manicured lawns, was jolted awake by squealing tires and shotgun blasts. Owners of an illegal grow-op were protecting their stash from a rival group that had shown up to steal it.

The scene was riddled with shell casings and bullet holes. A seriously wounded man in his 20s was slumped in the passenger seat of a car, the back window shot out.

Nearby homes had been damaged by stray bullets but this time, fortunately, no innocent bystanders were caught in the crossfire.

Police would later learn that the gang running the grow-op had been involved that very evening in the beating death of an innocent man they suspected tried to break into another one of their operations. The victim's decomposed body was eventually found, in Lake Ontario, in 2009.

While no longer on the front lines, Franks can't forget the adrenaline rush that comes with a big raid. The tension that builds moments before breaking down doors with steel rams. The racing heart. The tightened muscles.

“It's violent and fast and loud,” he says. “You never know what you're going to find on the other side of the door.”

Suspects might resist arrest. Doors and windows could be booby trapped with spikes or electric current.

And the smell, the sickly sweet pungent odour, weaves itself into the fabric of clothing.

“It’s not like somebody smoking a single joint at a concert that you happen to smell when walking by,” says Franks. “It’s a smell that stays with you.”

In fact, the station is equipped with a washer and dryer so cops don’t take the overpowering stench home.

Taking down grow-ops in family homes with young children are the most difficult to deal with, says Franks, who’s been involved in dozens of busts involving kids.

One case that still resonates involved two children under the age of 7. Their parents were arrested for growing marijuana for an organized crime network in their basement and in two of the four bedrooms in their home. The older child, acting as a translator, had to explain to his parents why they were under arrest while police waited for an interpreter. The sobbing children were led away by social workers while their parents sat handcuffed in the living room.

“That’s horrible, for the kids, the police, and the parents,” says Franks. “There are no winners in that.”

When he thinks about his first bust and reflects on the sophisticated operations he’s currently overseeing, Franks describes it as “an amazing evolution.”

In 1979, when he pulled over the drunk driver who had a few joints on him, that small amount of weed turned out to be an aggravating factor at sentencing.

“Today possession of a small amount of marijuana seems to be barely considered crime-worthy by the courts, let alone an aggravating factor,” he says. “There was less marijuana around 30 years ago so when you did see it, it was something you were going to take action on.”

Nowadays cops are less likely to arrest someone smoking a joint and will often crush it into the ground or flush it down the toilet. It gets the message across without draining police and court resources.

The government is considering a proposal by Canada’s police chiefs to hand out tickets for possession of small amounts — less than 30 grams. No dollar

amount for the ticket has been suggested. And that, says Franks, is “a major, major change from what we’ve had in the past.”

When he thinks back on how the landscape has changed, he is amazed.

“The community is willing to put up with a lot more than they were 20, 30, 40 years ago.”

By the numbers

65 to 98: Percentage of cannabis production related to organized crime in Canada.

249: Number of marijuana grow-ops processed by the drug squad in 2010. By comparison there were 210 cases in 2009, and 287 cases in 2006.

193: Number of people charged in connection with grow-ops in 2010.

207: Percentage increase in the number of grow-ops dismantled between 2002 and 2010.