



**College Students Working In The Marijuana Industry:
Brief Results**

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INTRODUCTION

This research brief highlights key descriptive findings from a 2013 survey of students at Humboldt State University (HSU), a public university that is located in a rural region known for widespread outdoor and indoor marijuana production. The survey was designed to understand features of the labor market for marijuana production, the reasons why student workers participate in this sector, and determinants and impacts of participation. This document provides a preliminary examination of the survey findings. We are making these highlights available early in order to disseminate information to policy makers in advance of peer-reviewed publication.

Marijuana production is illegal in the United States under federal law. If prosecuted for producing, distributing, or selling marijuana, one faces the possibility of imprisonment. In California, medical marijuana production is legal subject to state and local restrictions after Proposition 215 passed in 1996. Under Prop 215, a person may produce marijuana for themselves or others for medical purposes.

This survey was conducted in fall 2013 following the U.S. Attorney General announcement that federal law enforcement will not interfere with state law. Thus, this was a time of change in legal climate. Some of the students engaged in marijuana production and distribution were complying with California law, and others were not. It is unknown how much of the cannabis grown in California is grown for medical purposes, and how much is grown for recreational use and therefore illegal under California law. Cannabis cultivation therefore occupies a legal gray area. We take the view that participation in this industry, while perhaps meeting California law in some cases, is never the less a more risky and inherently different occupation. Our goal is to better understand the reasons and extent to which college students participate in this industry.

PRIOR LITERATURE

The cost of a college education has increased substantially over the past couple of decades. Both private and public universities have increased tuition in response to decreased private and public investment. While student fees and tuition have been increasing, the availability of federal and other student aid has been decreasing.

This funding gap poses a dilemma for students and their families seeking to finance an ever more costly college education. For first generation college students entering college at an academic and economic disadvantage, this funding gap is even more pronounced. In response, students seek out multiple strategies to finance their education. Some seek full- or part-time employment on or off campus. In fact, 38 percent of full-time students and 72 percent of part-time students at 4 year universities are employed (U.S. Department of Commerce 2011). Typically, students are drawn to relatively low paying employment in the service sector as schedules are flexible and expectations of prior employment experience are minimal. Other students, however, undoubtedly seek work in the underground economy receiving compensation off the "IRS radar" (Schlosser 2003).

Not all employment in an underground economy is inherently illegal. Some may pick up odd jobs in gardening, child-care, or performing general household labor, for example. Still others find a range of opportunities in burgeoning illicit economies that vary by geographic region. Such opportunities include buying and selling stolen items (fencing), sex work, or the drug trade. This

study focuses on a college community where by some estimates marijuana accounts for 25 percent (Budwig 2013) of local economic activity. The purpose of this research is to measure the extent to which college students in a public university serving largely first generation college students subsidize the cost of their education by working in the local marijuana industry. Industry is defined broadly to be inclusive of those who specifically grow marijuana for either recreational or medicinal purposes or those who perform other tasks to directly support marijuana cultivation, distribution, and consumption.

There is a large literature that determines the factors that lead to marijuana use by college students but there is very little research into the reasons for working in the marijuana production sector. Bouchard et al. (2009) looks at high school student participation in marijuana production in Quebec, Canada. August (2013) considers characteristics of marijuana growers in Humboldt County. Potter et al. (2013) presents an international comparison of cannabis growers.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on the results of a web based survey administered to a random sample of 2,350 HSU students who were contacted by email between September 10 and 19, 2013. We chose September, rather than later months, in order to minimize the number of students who didn't reply due to being busy harvesting marijuana. We obtained a random sample of 2,350 student email addresses from the University's Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) Office out of 8,293 students who were in attendance during the Fall semester.

We followed the tailored design method (Dillman 2009) in recruiting student participation. We sent initial email messages to sampled students inviting their participation. Two separate follow up email messages were sent three days apart consistent with the three email contact strategy recommended by Dillman et al. (2009) for web based survey implementation. As an incentive, students could voluntarily enter into a random drawing to win one of ten \$20 gift certificates from Amazon.com. This unconditional incentive was offered whether the survey was completed or not. Based on communications with the University IRP office we expected our survey response rate to be approximately 25 percent or 590 students.

The research was approved by our university's Institutional Review Board. Since we were collecting information about illegal activity, we adopted a number of safeguards to protect the identify of the student respondents. First, we did not collect personal information such as name, address, exact grade point average, or major. Second, we used an online survey platform that allowed us to "anonymize" responses; respondent IP addresses and unique login information were not tracked. Moreover, incoming survey data was stored in another country. These safeguards were described in the consent form provided to respondents.

A randomly generated unique login was sent to each student to insure that students took the survey only once. Students who chose the random gift drawing were directed to another website to provide an email address, but those addresses could not be linked to the survey responses.

Students responded to 31 close-ended questions relating to their student debt, income sources, housing situation and expenses, employment status, academic standing and achievement, and

demographic background. Students were also asked about whether marijuana was grown in the residence where they lived, the extent to which they were employed growing and/or distributing marijuana, their earning earnings from marijuana related employment, their level of marijuana consumption, and their attitudes toward the impact of marijuana legalization on their employment in the marijuana industry. Once the survey administration period ended, we exported the survey data as SPSS readable files and purged student response data from our web based survey account.

There were 571 total respondents to the survey. This reflects a response rate of 24.3 percent. We compared our sample to the HSU student population on several demographic characteristics. Women were significantly more likely to participate than men. Sixty-two percent of respondents were female compared to 54 percent of HSU students. Freshmen and sophomores were underrepresented in the sample due to other competing university email initiatives that targeted underclassmen and the desire to not burden students with too many emails. We compared the means of a number of variables from the sample against non-sample students and found them to be very similar except for containing fewer freshmen. Given this bias in class standing, it is important that these results be understood as reflecting a survey of primarily juniors and seniors.

MARIJUANA-RELATED JOBS

We asked a number of questions about participation in jobs directly involved in marijuana cultivation, processing, and sales. We asked students to report both type of employment and compensation either monetary or non-monetary. We did not ask about employment in peripheral industries such as smoke or horticulture supply shops.

These are the twelve paid marijuana-related jobs we identified along with a brief description. These descriptions were not included in the survey:

- Owned or operated a marijuana grow site. Owning or operating a cannabis grow site involves making decisions about all aspects of production including location, hiring workers, fertilizer and supply acquisition, processing, sales, and distribution. Owners receive the net profits after paying all the costs of growing the marijuana. Operators receive a share of the net profits if they are not the owner.
- Produced concentrated marijuana (hash or dabs). Producers of concentrated cannabis make decisions about location, process used, acquisition of materials for processing, and distribution and sales. Producers receive either all or a share of the net profits after costs are covered, depending on their role as either independent operator or worker.
- Produced edible cannabis products. Producers of edible cannabis products make decisions about what foods to produce, method of cannabis infusion, acquisition of cannabis for use, and distribution and sales. Producers receive the net profits after costs from the sale of their product.
- House sat at a grow site. House sitting at a grow site involves staying at a residence dedicated to indoor cannabis cultivation while the owner/resident is out of town. House sitters provide security to prevent burglary and/or care for the plants on site. House sitters receive compensation related to the specific operation in the form of cash and/or cannabis.

- Cooked for a grow site or processing operation. Cooking for a grow site involves working as a cook to support a large grow site or post-harvest processing operation. Cooks are compensated according to the specific operation in the form of cash and/or cannabis.
- Watched or guarded an outdoor grow site. Watching an outdoor grow site involves residing on a rural piece of property that is used for growing cannabis to protect the crop from theft. Grow site security are compensated with a flat fee or a share of the crop in the form of cash and/or cannabis.
- Trimmed or processed raw product for distribution. Trimming cannabis involves processing the cannabis plant from large, leafy, flowery stalks into small, individual, dried buds. The work is sticky, tedious labor. Trimmers are paid hourly or by weight of finished product processed. Compensation is in the form of cash and/or cannabis.
- Managed a processing operation (Trim boss). Managing a trimming operation involves overseeing the harvest and processing of the cannabis crop. Tasks can include coordinating the needs of workers, accounting for all the product through processing, and general management. Managers are compensated with a share of the crop or a fee according to the specific operation in the form of cash and/or cannabis.
- Sold marijuana. Selling marijuana involves distributing cannabis to individual consumers. Compensation is earned through markup from wholesale price.
- Transported or trafficked marijuana. Transporting cannabis involves the movement of product from one region to another to obtain a higher price. Those transporting cannabis can be compensated with a fee or the net profits from sales based on one's role as driver and/or seller. Pay is almost exclusively cash for this job.
- Worked at a dispensary. Working at a medical marijuana dispensary can involve retail sales, growing cannabis, and management. Workers are compensated with hourly wages or salary.
- Worked in an another unnamed job.

FINDINGS

Caution should be used in interpreting these results for several reasons. First, the following results reflect the raw, unweighted returns. As such, the results apply only to those who answered our survey. Second, these results are not necessarily representative of Humboldt State University students in general. Given that 75 percent of our sample did not respond to the survey invitation, nonrespondents may be qualitatively different from those who did respond. Likewise, nonrespondents may have very different experiences in working in the cannabis economy. Third, we lack a baseline against which to compare these data and therefore cannot infer that reported levels of involvement are comparatively high or low. Finally, given that these are self-report data we were unable to independently confirm information provided by respondents.

Student Respondents

As can be seen in Table 1, most of our student respondents were female (62 percent) and between the ages of 21 and 30 (74 percent). The average age of student respondents was 24.5 years and varied between 19 and 69 years old. Two in three student respondents (67 percent) only identified themselves as white; 14 percent of students self-identified as being of more than one race/ethnicity, including white/caucasian. Twelve percent were pursuing post-graduate

studies and 69 percent of students were receiving financial aid.

Table 1 Demographic profile of student respondents

Sex	<i>N</i>	%
Female	355	62%
Male	214	38%
Total	569	100%
Age		
16 to 20 years old	93	17%
21 to 30 years old	416	74%
31-40 years old	35	6%
41 and over	21	4%
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Caucasian	379	67%
Hispanic	70	12%
African American	1	0%
Asian Pacific Islander	3	1%
Native American	11	2%
Other	22	4%
Multiracial (including White)	79	14%
Class Standing		
Undergraduate	503	88%
Postgraduate	68	12%

Note: Category totals may not equal total sample size as not all student respondents answered each question.

Student participation in the marijuana industry

Seventeen percent or one sixth of student respondents (N=94 out of 553 valid responses)

reported having worked in a marijuana-related job over the previous twelve months. We find that 80 percent (N=444 out of 553 valid responses) of students reported that they did not try to find a marijuana-related job.

Most students (69 percent) who reported working in a marijuana related job were employed as trimmers. As can be seen in Table 2, approximately 1 in 3 student respondents reported that they sold marijuana and 1 in 5 transported marijuana and/or provided house sitting at a grow site. Working at a dispensary or as a trim boss were the least common marijuana related jobs reported by student respondents.

Table 2: Types of jobs performed by students reporting employment in the marijuana industry

Marijuana-related job	Percentage of students reporting having worked in the job over the last twelve months
Trimmed	69%
Sold marijuana	32%
Transported marijuana	21%
House sat	21%
Made edibles	17%
Owned or operated	13%
Produced concentrates	11%
Watched or guarded	11%
Cooked food	9%
Trim boss	4%
Worked at dispensary	4%
Other work	13%
	<i>N=94</i>

Note: Students could report working in multiple jobs.

Student respondents reported working in more than one type of marijuana related job. Forty-seven, or half, of the 94 students who reported working in a marijuana related job indicated that they worked in two or more categories and 20 percent reported working in four or more job categories. Two students reported working in ten different marijuana-related jobs.

Not everyone who wanted a marijuana related job reported finding employment. We asked students if they had tried to find a marijuana-related job but could not (see Table 3). Four percent of respondents (N=22 of the 553 respondents) reported both not finding a marijuana related job and not having a marijuana-related job. This means that 19 percent ($=22/(94+22)$) of those desiring marijuana-related work reported not finding work in the industry in the last twelve months. While this looks over the last year and is not directly comparable to the standard unemployment rate (which looks over the last two weeks), it suggests that it is not particularly easy to get employment in this sector. Additionally, another 8 respondents of the 94 who reported having a marijuana-related job also reported not finding such a job, indicating that they wanted more work in the industry at some time over the last twelve months.

Table 3: Characteristics of marijuana-related jobs and other jobs

	Marijuana-related jobs	Non-marijuana-related jobs
Modified unemployment rate*	19%	11%
Average months worked	3.5 months	8.5 months
Average hours worked per week	19 hours	26 hours
Average total dollars earned over last twelve months	\$5,112	\$7,407

*Modified unemployment rate is the number who looked but did not find a job over the last twelve months, divided by the sum of those workers plus the number who did find a job over the last twelve months.

We compared the modified unemployment rate for those working in marijuana-related jobs to those working in non-marijuana jobs. Of 571 students, 432 (76 percent) reported having had one or more non-marijuana-related jobs over the last twelve months, while 84 (15 percent) reported not looking for a job. Fifty-five, or about ten percent, tried to find a job but couldn't. This means that 11 percent ($=55/(432+55)$) of those desiring non-marijuana-related work reported not finding a job in the last twelve months. Thus, comparing the modified unemployment rates, marijuana-related jobs appear to be relatively more difficult to come by.

We find that 75 students reported having both a marijuana-related job and a non-marijuana-related job, which is 14 percent out of the 553 respondents. Most students who reported working in the marijuana industry also have other jobs, with 75 of the 94 students or 80 percent with marijuana-related jobs also reporting holding a non-marijuana-related job.

As can be seen in Table 3 over the last twelve months, student respondents reported working an average of 3.5 months (N=85) in a marijuana-related job and 8.5 months (N=425) in a non-marijuana-related job. They also reported that when employed they spent an average of 19 hours per week working in a marijuana-related job and an average of 26 hours in a non-marijuana-related job.

It is difficult to directly compare hourly wages in marijuana-related jobs to wages in non-marijuana-related jobs since workers in the former are often paid in marijuana or paid a piecemeal rate rather than an hourly wage. For example, we asked the sixty trimmers how many dollars per hour they received, and only four answered the question. Instead, 63 percent of the trimmers who reported how many dollars per trimmed pound they received said \$200 per pound. We can, however, easily report their annual compensation. We asked students approximately how many dollars they earned in total for all of their jobs over the last 12 months (see Table 2). Students employed in marijuana-related jobs reported less earnings than students working in non-marijuana related jobs. For marijuana-related jobs (N=85), the maximum reported was \$65,000, the median was \$1,000 and the mean was \$5,112. For non-marijuana-related jobs (N=406), the median was \$5,000 and the maximum reported was \$126,000 and the mean was \$7,407.

Growing marijuana

We asked students two questions about whether they grew marijuana. Twelve students out of 553 valid respondents said they “owned or operated a marijuana grow site” for pay over the last twelve months. Additionally, 35 out of 571 said they “grew marijuana” over the last twelve months. Only ten students indicated that they did both. Twenty-two students reported growing but not owning or operating a grow site. Perhaps these students were working for someone else or growing a small amount for personal consumption. Additionally, two students reported owning a grow site but not growing marijuana, which is possible if others ran these students’ grow sites. If we define being a “grower” as someone who grew over the last twelve months or owned and operated a grow site, then we find 37 growers (7 percent) among the 571 student respondents.

We asked the thirty five students who reported growing marijuana how many plants they grew over the last twelve months. The reported number of plants grown ranged from 1 to 3,000 plants with a mean of 180 and a median of 10. Seven (21 percent) of the 33 students who answered the question reported growing 100 or more plants over the last twelve months.

We also asked students what they did with the marijuana they grew. Of the 34 valid responses, the vast majority (77 percent) reported that they used the marijuana they grew for personal use (see Table 4). Just under half of the student growers (44 percent) reported that they gave what they grew to friends. Slightly more than 1 in 4 students who reported growing (27 percent) said they sold what they grew. However, 11 out of 34, or 32 percent, sold to customers or to middlemen.

Table 4: What students did with the marijuana they grew

	Percent
I used it	77%
I gave it to friends	44%
I sold it to customers	27%
I traded it	18%
I sold it to middlemen/wholesalers	12%
I sold it to a medical marijuana operation	9%
Other	15%
	N=34

Note: Students could provide multiple answers.

We asked the 35 students who reported growing marijuana over the last twelve months to share their sales figures over the last year. Eighteen of the 29 students who responded said they earned zero dollars. Of the eleven reporting positive sales, the range was between \$500 and \$130,000 with a mean of \$27,400 and median of \$6,000.

Humboldt County Marijuana Related Labor Migration Patterns

We wanted to understand how Humboldt County's place as the center of U.S. marijuana production may be related to labor migration. As can be seen in Table 5, among the 94 students reporting working in the industry, 9 percent (N=8) were born in the county and 81 percent (N=76) moved to the county within the last five years. Of these 76 new arrivals, 40 percent (N=30) had a marijuana-related job before moving and 29 percent (N=22) viewed the opportunity to work in a marijuana-related job as being at least somewhat significant in their decision to move to Humboldt County.

If we look at comparable figures for students who do not work in the industry (N=454) and who indicated whether or not they moved to the county, we find 6 percent (N=26) were born in the county and 81 percent (N=369) moved within the last five years. Thus, comparing students who report working in a marijuana-related job to those who do not, a slightly greater percentage were born in Humboldt County. Of these 369 new arrivals to the county, 4 percent (N=14) had a marijuana-related job before moving to the county and 4 percent (N=13 out of 367 valid responses) viewed the opportunity to work in a marijuana-related job at least somewhat significant in their decision to move to Humboldt County. Thus recent arrivals who report working in a marijuana-related job are much more likely to have prior experience in the field and such jobs are important to their decision to move to Humboldt County.

Table 5: Student origin by marijuana employment status

	Employed in Marijuana Job	Not Employed in Marijuana Job
For all students:		
Born in Humboldt County	9%	6%
Moved to Humboldt County within last five years	81%	81%
	<i>N=94</i>	<i>N=454</i>
For students who moved to Humboldt County within last five years:		
Prior marijuana job before moving	40%	4%
Marijuana job significant for move	29%	4%
	<i>N=76</i>	<i>N=369</i>

Twenty students reported that they transported marijuana for pay over the last twelve months. We asked these students what was the furthest distance that they transported marijuana, and 9 (45 percent) said out of state, 7 (35 percent) said out of the county, and only 4 (20 percent) said out of the city. Thus more than half of the students who reported transporting marijuana out of Humboldt County delivered to another state.

Residential Growing, Energy Use, and Federal Lands

We also examined the extent to which local housing stock might be devoted to indoor marijuana cultivation. Of the 506 student respondents who reported living off campus, 27 (5 percent) reported living where marijuana is currently grown. Since only thirteen of these same twenty-seven students indicated that they grew marijuana in the last 12 months, some students may simply live where marijuana is grown but not consider themselves growers. For the twenty-seven students who reported living where marijuana was grown, 14 (52 percent) reported that the marijuana is grown indoors. Half of these students reported that 1 to 2 bedrooms were devoted to marijuana cultivation; 3 (21 percent) reported no bedrooms were used and there were no reports of three or more bedrooms being devoted to marijuana production.

Humboldt State University is located in Arcata California. Given the city's recent adoption of a surcharge on high residential electricity users (City of Arcata 2014), we wanted to better understand the energy costs associated with marijuana cultivation. Twenty-six of the 35 students

who reported growing marijuana over the last twelve months report growing where they live, and 15 (44 percent) of these 35 students report growing marijuana indoors. We asked these fifteen what is the average monthly electric bill where they live, and they report a range between \$40 and \$2,000 with a mean of \$435 and a median of \$200.

We asked student growers if they grew marijuana on public lands (e.g., in federal forests, state parks, tribal lands, or city parks). Of the nine students who reported growing marijuana outdoors at a location other than where they live, only one student reported growing on public lands.

Impact of Legalization on Student Marijuana Related Employment

We wanted to know how student involvement in the local marijuana industry might change if cannabis became fully legal at the state and federal levels (see Table 6). We asked all students “How likely or unlikely is it that you would work at a marijuana-related job if marijuana became fully legal at both the federal and state levels?” Of those who responded (N=543), close to 1 in 5 students reported that it is likely (11 percent) to very likely (8 percent) that they would work at a marijuana-related job should both state and federal law change. Forty-eight percent reported that they were unlikely to work in a marijuana-related job.

Table 6: Impact of legalization

	How likely or unlikely is it that you would work at a marijuana-related job if marijuana became fully legal at both the federal and state levels?	If marijuana is legalized at both the federal and state levels, how likely or unlikely are you to increase the amount of marijuana that you grow?
very unlikely	35%	24%
unlikely	13%	9%
neutral	28%	26%
likely	11%	18%
very likely	8%	21%
don't know	5%	3%
	<i>N=571</i>	<i>N=34</i>

We asked the thirty-five people who grew marijuana over the last twelve month the question “If marijuana is legalized at both the federal and state levels, how likely or unlikely are you to increase the amount of marijuana you grow?” However, almost 40 percent indicated that they would likely increase the amount they grew.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The findings reported here describe the self-reported marijuana labor market participation of primarily junior and senior level college students from one university. These results are not generalizable to the non-college student population in the county or to college students elsewhere.

Most students reported not seeking a marijuana-related job. Eighty percent of students who responded to our survey reported not seeking employment in a marijuana-related job. One out of six students reported working in a marijuana-related job; one third of these students reported trimming and one third reported selling marijuana. Half reported holding more than one job. Not everyone who wants a marijuana-related job can find one, and it appears to be more difficult to get a marijuana-related job than a non-marijuana-related job. Students employed in marijuana-related jobs also reported working fewer months, fewer hours per week, and earning less over the past year compared to those students employed in non-marijuana-related jobs.

Of those students who responded, 6.5 percent reported growing marijuana over the past twelve months and 1 out of 5 of these reported growing more than 100 plants. Three-quarters of students who reported growing marijuana said they did so for personal use while one third grew to sell to customers or middlemen. The average reported earnings from sales of grown marijuana over the last twelve months was \$27,400.

If we look at students employed in marijuana-related jobs who moved to Humboldt County, a much greater percentage already had experience in the marijuana industry, and a much greater percentage saw the opportunity to work in the field as a draw to the county compared to those who were not employed in a marijuana-related job. However, most (60 percent) of those students working in marijuana related jobs who moved to Humboldt County had no prior marijuana job experience and such an opportunity was not significant for the vast majority (70 percent) of these students. Over half of the people who reported transporting marijuana out-of-the-county delivered out of the state.

Among students living off campus, 5.3 percent reported living where marijuana is currently grown. In cases where growing takes place indoors, half of the students reported devoting one or two bedrooms to growing marijuana and the average electric bill is \$435. Only 1 of the 9 students who reported growing marijuana outdoors at a location other than where they live reported growing on public lands.

Almost 40 percent of those who reported growing indicated that they would increase production if it became legal to do so at the federal and state levels.

In sum, these results reveal that students who report marijuana related employment generally provide manual labor in the form of trimming - rather than ownership and operation - for the local marijuana economy. Compared to non-marijuana-related work, marijuana employment for our student respondents is harder to obtain and earns less annually. Given that no prior research has sought to determine the extent and nature of college student employment in the marijuana industry, there is no baseline against which these results can be compared. Future research will

expand the sampling design to target college students on other CSU campuses.

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