

America's Largest Cannabis Labor Market

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A Provisional Profile and Proposal for New Research

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The labor market that supports California’s Emerald Triangle – a globally renowned regional marijuana industry (e.g., Leeper 1990) – is a wildly diverse and still largely subterranean black-market entity. Aside from being a trendsetter for cannabis production around the world, the Triangle is likely the largest single producer of cannabis in the nation. And while California is the nation’s most valuable farm state, marijuana is California’s top crop (Starrs and Goin 2010:246-253). However, much of the existing data on the domestic marijuana industry is scarce, unscientific, and often biased. Therefore, there continues to be a great need to conduct representative field research on this labor market.

Three primary actors operate in any labor market: employers, government agents, and workers (Benjamin, Gunderson, and Riddel 2007). Hence, an analysis of America’s largest cannabis labor market at the point of legalization would be enlightening. However, my profile is provisional, based on limited first-hand research, and a review of small-scale studies, the gray literature, media stories, and government reports, which are incomplete, and/or have questionable sources and/or methods.

Cannabis Growers

The Triangle’s cannabis is likely grown by tens of thousands of micro-scale “mom & pop” producers in gardens containing no more than a few hundred mature plants, thousands of still relatively small-scale “green-rush” farmers with grows of up to a few thousand harvestable plants, and an unknown number of “trespass” growers of various scales of production.¹ A few of the latter may be part of “drug trafficking organizations,” although they are considered “domestic” DTOs. The White House “drug czar” admitted that foreign cartels have no presence in California’s marijuana industry (CA NORML 2013).

These distinctions among grower types are relevant because wages, working conditions, and labor force characteristics appear to vary widely based on the size of the production unit. Proposed research would collect an adequate amount of data to assess the ties between growers and their workers. While the size of cannabis grows varies, the revenues may be substantial. Mom & pop gardens are estimated to garner at least \$100,000 annually (*SF Weekly* 2015), placing such growers in the region’s middle-class (PEW 2016). A green-rusher’s income might be ten times greater, which provides upper-class status (PEW 2016). Such revenues may help explain the high wages and decent working conditions often reported.

The State

The diversity in types of cannabis growers and the relatively modest size of all farms is a legacy Prohibition, which began in California in 1913, and evolved into a federal “war on drugs” by 1971. Prohibition ensured subterranean, nonstandard grows. In this, the marijuana industry contrasts radically with the relative homogeneity of the nation’s (legal) agribusiness sector. In the post-World War I era, agriculture devolved from a multitude of small-scale “family farms” into a handful of very large-scale “factories in the fields” with huge acreages (McWilliams 1939). State policies were at the forefront of these major changes in farm ownership (Goldschmidt 1947). Today urban financiers control most legal crop industries. In an effort to increase quarterly profits, these farms are rife with commodity, fiscal, and workplace safety and security violations. The impunity agribusiness owners enjoy is best exemplified by the continued recruitment of millions of “illegal” immigrant workers (Krissman 2000). These workers are politically disenfranchised, economically marginalized, and physically abused (Krissman 2005, 2002a and b). Indeed, comparing cannabis with “apples and oranges” reveals that the distinction that the state claims to draw between legal and illegal activities is actually quite murky (Heyman 2013).

¹ Estimates of cannabis plants per acre vary from several hundred “big seed starts” to 10,000 “smaller clones” (C. O’Neil, Chair, Emerald Growers Association, personal communication).

Cannabis Workers

Cannabis is similar to legal crops like apples and oranges in regard to the perceived skills of its workforce. Farm workers are generally considered unskilled in that the tasks they are expected to perform are learned within one year “on the job” rather than via specialized post-secondary education or long-term apprenticeships. Indeed, teens and adults with low levels of educational attainment are major sources of farm labor. However, most of these tasks require a great deal of practice, and some workers learn to excel while others are unsuccessful (e.g., Maxwell 2006).

While apple, orange, and cannabis crops are all labor-intensive (defined as more than 30% of the total costs of production), with a variety of tasks requiring considerable human labor (soil prep, planting, irrigation, pruning, etc.), the bulk of total labor costs occur during harvest and/or post-harvest processing. In the case of cannabis, the small scale of most gardens/grows makes it possible for a grower and their immediate family to accomplish most of the pre-harvest tasks without supplemental paid labor. Cooperative exchanges of labor among neighbors and friends that are growers allow many other tasks to be accomplished without the need to pay wages.

However, “trimming” is so labor-intensive and time-sensitive that hired hands are required. In the Triangle, local residents provide most of the waged labor.² This fact helps reduce the level of labor exploitation, since many of a grower’s workers are also neighbors and friends. Trimming involves stripping the harvested plants down to their prized flowers (“buds”), which command the highest prices.³ There is a huge gray literature on trimming, which often elevates this task to a “cannabis culture” version of tourists that pay to work on a dude ranch. However, wages will be the proxy here to begin comparing cannabis workers with those working in apples and oranges.

Almost everyone agrees that trimming is boring and tedious, but lucrative. Skilled trimmers earn \$20-30 per hour at a piece-rate that varies from \$150-200 per trimmed pound of plant. A trimmer may process up to 2 pounds daily, although likely in a 10-14 hour stint. This level of effort is rewarded with \$18,000 for 5 days a week during the 3-month harvest season. This is working-class income if labor is extended via multiple harvests,⁴ and/or other employment. Indeed, the “pot wage” is local parlance for the relatively high minimum locals expect from any job, based on the prevailing wage in the marijuana industry. Finally, many trimmers in the Emerald Triangle are also mom & pop growers, which may provide them entrée into the middle-class (PEW 2016). The region’s marijuana industry is “the elephant in the economy,” providing a decent standard of living to tens of thousands of local families who spend much of their earnings within the region, leading to significant multiplier effects that support myriad other local businesses (*HumCo* 2013:10).

The situation for trimmers contrasts so dramatically with the average earnings of farm workers employed in legal crops such as apples and oranges that the marijuana industry may be “an ag anomaly”

² So-called “trimmigrants” migrate to the Emerald Triangle for the fall harvest, where they constitute 10% of the total workforce in southern Humboldt County, the heart of the Triangle. Most are American residents, while the foreigners arrive with tourist visas; although the latter are illegally working in the US, they do not cross the militarized border illegally, and are not as exploitable as Mexican farm workers (Mikal Jakubal, personal communication; *NPR* 2015).

³ Assuming a wholesale price of \$1-1,500 per processed pound, trimmers currently earn 10-20% of the commodity value; however, processed “concentrates” and “edibles” (neither of which require hand-trimming), and machine trimmers are enjoying increasing popularity.

⁴ New technologies, including indoor growing and outdoor “light-deprivation” methods, allow 3-4 harvests annually, which has increased average incomes for both growers and their workers.

(Krissman 2015). The average farm worker in a legal crop earns almost \$8 per hour, although piece-rates in the apple and orange industries actually average less than the federal minimum of \$7.25, while annual wages are under \$13,000 per year for individuals and \$16,000 for families (USDA 2010; Krissman 1996). These income levels are well below the poverty line (PEW 2016). As a result, the poorest cities in the state are rural “farm worker” communities with Latino majority populations. Meanwhile, worker’s compensation rates in the farm sector are only matched by two other particularly dangerous industries, construction and mining. However, unlike in the two latter industries, the average farm worker cannot file a claim for injuries or turn to a union for support because most of these workers is here illegally, and face deportation if they try to defend themselves by improving labor market conditions (USDL 2007; Krissman 2002b).

Is History Repeating Itself?

The fear of many is that legalization of cannabis could steer the marijuana industry away from its longtime status as an ag anomaly, and toward the corporate agribusiness model (Krissman 2015). Indeed, in Washington state the high piece-rate still offered in the Emerald Triangle has devolved to marijuana industry “internships” that pay \$10 an hour, not much better than the average wage for legal crop farm labor. In California, one cannabis activist, reacting to a growing panoply of proposed regulations, fees, licenses, and taxes, argued, “The state is treating marijuana like plutonium, and growers like potential terrorists.” Indeed, many of the founders and innovators of the industry could be sidelined by regulations demanding that industry actors have no preexisting felony convictions, the price paid for growing cannabis during the past century of Prohibition!

While California has caps on the current size of marijuana grows, this important curb on the corporatization of cannabis may be lifted as early as 2018. If this occurs, it is likely that corporate agribusiness will attempt to capture a crop pioneered by anti-corporate hippies that beat agribusiness types at their own game (Krissman 2016). The regions of production could shift to the federally-irrigated flatlands of the Central Valley or even the water-challenged southern California desert (Krissman 1997). The corporate breed of cannabis growers might even adopt the immigrant labor recruitment model currently used to generate high profits from, while creating endemic poverty in, rural California (Krissman 2005). Ultimately, family-based enterprises and American workers could be displaced from another industry controlled by a few powerful corporations that greatly increase income inequality wherever they take root (Krissman 1996).

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