

Growing Pains

How a Dutch Cross-Agency Team Took on Illegal Marijuana Production in Residential Areas

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One afternoon in June 2015, five men from different occupations met in a small room on the campus of Tilburg University in the south of the Netherlands. They had come directly from the first session of week-long innovation program where the leadership of the National Police (NP) and the Netherlands Public Prosecutor’s Office (OM) had delivered an urgent message to the thirty or so mostly public-sector professionals and city officials: organized crime was penetrating deeper into Dutch society, especially in the south where the participants were from. “Time is running out,” announced Mr. Bolhaar, the head of the Dutch Prosecution Service, “it’s up to you to put a stop to this!”ⁱ

The four-day intensive workshop kicked off a year-long program addressing issues that make headlines but are difficult to unravel, such as chemical dumping by massive, synthetic drug labs, human trafficking, and money laundering. The multifaceted nature of these organized-crime enterprises made one thing clear: no single government organization could tackle them alone. After the introductory statements, representatives from different organizations were assembled in small groups in separate rooms. They were charged with developing a novel, collaborative approach within the next nine months and then returning to report on their innovations. Bolhaar had exclaimed, “Surprise us!”

The plenary group had not seen this coming. One had been sent by his boss; another was “generally interested” in collaboration; a third had not even opened emails about the program. The opening speeches—about innovation and collaboration to tackle organized crime and creating public value by looking beyond current organizational practices—had sounded promising, but no one knew exactly what it meant.

ⁱ The Public Prosecution Service is headed by the Board of Prosecutors General. They decide on the Netherlands’ investigation and prosecution policy. Together with the organization’s directors and staff officers, the Board of Prosecutors General constitutes the national head office of the Public Prosecution Service (Parket-Generaal).

<https://www.prosecutionservice.nl/organisation/national-head-office>

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Doing Something Innovative

The group of five men, most of whom had not met before, was designated to do something about the issue of marijuana “grow houses.” There was evidence that drug gangs increasingly used spare rooms and attics of regular homeowners and renters in mostly working-class neighborhoods to illegally produce marijuana. The challenge for the group was loosely defined and daunting at the same time: disrupt the criminal homegrown marijuana industry and make it stick. They were supposed to be an “integrated multidisciplinary team.” But the team sitting at the table certainly did not look like one. They all had their own perspective, ideas, and their own distinct organizations to report to.

- John, a policeman from the city of Breda in the region of Brabant, was used to large police operations targeting criminal gangs. Having the capacity, he was eager to crack down on the grow houses through conventional raids.
- Richard worked at the national tax office, an organization that did not necessarily have a role in chasing people who rented their attics to drug criminals in order to supplement their income. His superiors were more interested in the ringleaders who lived in villas in the countryside and whose tax evasion and financial crimes were worth pursuing.
- Peter, from the power utility Enexis in the region of Limburg, was chiefly worried about customer safety. Pot-growers regularly tampered with the electrical supply and could cause huge blazes. As far as he was concerned, confronting criminals was a matter for law enforcement.
- Joop, director of public safety and security for Breda, had a specific goal in mind. He had seen the limited effect of the City’s current approach to tackling grow houses—simply delivering one blow and hoping it’s done—and wanted to come up with a more thorough, systematic approach.
- Dävid, a public prosecutor, knew that drug criminals put enormous pressure on poor and vulnerable people to allow these kinds of grow houses in their homes. He was concerned about the impact on the social fabric of neighborhoods if residential grow houses continued to exist with impunity. In the province of Limburg, where he was based, he had been devising plans with Peter, the only member of the team he already knew. But he knew nothing about Breda, located in the province of Noord-Brabant and out of his jurisdiction.

What, Exactly, is the Problem?

The group had been instructed to start by considering “the social problem” for which they would develop a remedy. For John, the police officer, there was no debate—this was clearly a drugs crime problem, which to him simply meant that the perpetrators had to be found and arrested. What more was there to talk about? John’s perspective made the others uneasy. Richard, for instance, wanted to talk about low income residents who probably saw the issue as just a bit of extra cash in their pockets, and not a serious offense. To him, allowing criminals to grow pot in their spare rooms and attics seemed like something people somehow accepted as normal.

The team members all struggled with rethinking the problem and the meeting became mostly a lot of talking and not much listening. Each tended to frame the problem—and the solution—from their own organization’s perspective or their own professional background. When one person proposed

something, another would exclaim, “Well, that’s got nothing to do with us!” It went on like this until someone pointed to the clock and said that they had better come up with something, soon.

Richard had recently watched a TV program that had stayed with him. A father whose family lived in one of the working-class neighborhoods where pot was secretly grown said the house next to him had caught fire while his daughter slept in her attic room right on the other side of the wall—adjacent to the pot room. “My a**hole-neighbor was growing pot!” the man had exclaimed with tears in his eyes.

“We can do something with this,” Richard told the group. “That man’s emotion, the fire risk faced by innocent people.” He went on to say that while the police were adamant about chasing and arresting criminals, they lacked the capacity to do it everywhere it was needed. He told John, “You have framed the problem so that only you are responsible for handling the situation, but there are 30,000 grow houses in this country, and the police will never have sufficient resources to take them all on.” Richard felt that by emphasizing the grave fire hazard they were more likely to enlist neighborhood residents to help the authorities confront the problem. The rest of the group did not immediately have a better plan, so this became the group’s entry point. While mitigating fire risk was no one’s primary area of expertise, everyone could see a link to the problem.

In Good Spirits

The next day, they met again with a “problem definition” that everybody could get behind, more or less, and they needed to think about tackling it. What could they do? They were only five individuals. Who were they to come up with an entirely new approach? The words of the Chief Prosecutor still rang in their ears: “It’s up to you to put a stop to this!” and “Surprise us!” But did he really mean that? How far outside of the box were they allowed to go, exactly? Who would provide the support and resources?

Things started to click between them. They began to see the problem from the perspective of the residents’ interests and challenges. “Otherwise they will never be motivated to help us,” Richard said. Their goals became: 1) to stop pot fires caused by illegal growing; 2) to drive out organized crime; and 3) to protect vulnerable residents. Richard, the catalyst in the group, realized the discussion was drifting away from the core business and mission of the tax office. But that did not bother him much, he remarked, “I was hooked, and I decided to stay on the team as an individual.”

They came up with a plan of action. Enexis would measure power consumption and analyze data, identifying housing blocks where power was sucked up in unusual amounts at unlikely times.ⁱⁱ Several teams, each consisting of Enexis, police, city, and fire department employees would knock on doors and ask to look inside all the housing units in these blocks. Each team would use the opportunity to educate the residents about the fire hazards associated with home pot-cultivation. They hoped to find grow houses and raise awareness, so that residents—once mobilized and aware of fire risk—would refuse to allow pot growers to use their attics. An official from the prosecutor’s office would supervise nearby.

ⁱⁱ Power utilities could measure power usage per housing block, not per individual unit. Grow houses need six weeks of constant lighting at full power.

Before any activity, the team would reach out to the neighborhood council to discuss the upcoming plans. And after the door knocking, city officials would come back to the area to collect feedback from residents.

At the end of the innovation program in Tilburg, the team left in good spirits. Not all of the sessions had been easy, and some friction had occurred; at times they had felt incredibly unproductive, as if they were just going around in circles. But in the end, they had in fact surprised themselves; none the men had expected to emerge with this particular problem definition, a new approach, and an action plan.

At that point, however, they had to go back to their own organizations where their colleagues were unaware of what they were working on.

Little Interest

At Enexis, the power utility, Peter's colleagues were not very interested in pot. Sure, they understood crime caused misery, and grow houses stole electricity. But illegally tapping the power supply to grow pot in an attic did not affect the bottom line. It just meant each legal subscriber paid a few more euros each year.

Fire safety, however, was a very big deal. "When the growers start tinkering with the heat lamps, the place literally starts to cook. We do need to protect our customers," Peter said. This argument worked: he was given permission to perform a fire-safety experiment—nothing to do with crime control—in a designated neighborhood. Soon after, Enexis ran a power test on an apartment block. It was a success, but it was just one building. "It was risky," he recalled, "because we did not know if and how this would work on a larger scale," (i.e., a whole neighborhood). But the successful experiment inspired confidence within his organization.

Upon his return to Breda, Joop, the city official, discussed the plan with his colleagues to decide on an area or neighborhood where the team could try it out. Bringing the fire department into the conversation, an employee expressed reservations: "We need to get along with the residents to do our job. Sure, we do prevention, but we can't be seen to be doing police work." After several meetings, they finally agreed that when it came to ringing doorbells, firefighters would not be at the doorstep with the other agencies but would instead watch from a distance.

Joop had to convince his boss, Mayor Paul Depla—who had many questions about physical and political risks—of the robustness of the plan and the selection of neighborhoods for the experiment. He wondered if it would be possible to try the approach in different areas of the City: neighborhoods suspected of pot-growing as well as those where such activity seemed unlikely. This way, he argued, there would be a control group of sorts, and the possibility of stigmatizing neighborhoods and harassing people could be avoided. What if the team burst in on a single mother on welfare who had some plants in her attic? He did not want it to appear as if the might of the state was directed against vulnerable citizens.

Joop promised he would fine-tune the plan where possible, including picking a neighborhood that would not raise suspicions and where grow houses were not entirely absent either. At the same time,

he told the mayor that inevitably there would be risk involved, including the possibility that none of the work would make a difference. “It was an experiment—there’s always uncertainty,” remarked Joop as the designated weekend approached. “The mayor had to live with this. We honestly didn't know what to expect, if residents would even let us in when we rang the bell. But it sure was exciting.”

Feeling Successful

Mayor Depla gave his permission to test the new approach and by the last week of October 2015, everything was ready for the two-day experiment. John, from the Breda police, had his list of apartment blocks from Enexis: they would start with three-story flats in the area known as Muizenberg and then move to a caravan-park called Kesteren on the second day, so it would not appear as if one place had been singled out. The team distributed flyers to residents and the fire department arranged to station an officer nearby to explain the activity to residents.

On Friday, the operation started. The team went straight to an address that had recently recorded a huge power surge. They found nothing but an energy-hungry electronic billiards game in a sports hall. In the meantime, a resident put out a Facebook message that the police were looking for a drug criminal. Breda’s public information officer had to scramble to play that one down.

That first day, the operation ended at nightfall. An elderly woman, upset, called the police to say strangers were ringing her bell; in the dark, the team may have seemed unusually threatening, John concluded. Over the two days there were no complications. A temporary power cut they had worried about having to pull down on the neighborhood was not necessary after all. They were allowed in to all 400 homes where they requested entrance. Some even asked them to come have a look right away if they were heading out of their home soon. Of the two grow houses they found, one—which they accessed by climbing in through a window—had transformers for grow-lamps baking at 97 degrees Celsius.

But just two busts were disappointing, John acknowledged. His police colleagues were let down, too, accustomed to making a bigger splash. Overall the reaction in the City was tepid, with Mayor Depla telling local media that it was a new approach pioneered in Breda and that he was basically satisfied.

The team of five felt successful; the experiment showed that the concept had worked. There were lessons learned, as well. The first one was that the number of households for door knocking was just too high; the search area had to be smaller next time. Enexis also concluded that they could repeat the operation once but after that, someone else was going to have to fund the equipment costs. A third lesson concerned the project’s messaging, which proved hardest to control. The media quickly made it about criminality and crooks, not the fire hazard faced by citizens. “Residents will say you’re just after bad guys—leave me out of it,” John mentioned. But he had to admit that all the organizations had worked well together and stayed firmly on message. “We projected a strong and unified image,” he added, “a common purpose, despite our different objectives.”

Making the Innovation Scalable and Sustainable

In the year that followed, the team launched new operations in other southern Dutch cities, including Tilburg, where they originally met. On one occasion, four indoor pot farms in one district were rolled up, while at the same time a host of other problems like gas leaks, meter fraud, and illegal power diversions were identified. “You’ll come across a lot you’re not looking for,” Dävid remarked, “but that you need to do something about.”

Reflecting on Mr. Bolhaar’s message that the depth and breadth of organized crime in the region was immense and spreading, Dävid considered what it would take to roll out the approach in other regions, possibly nationwide. “We needed courage, support, and commitment from our top managers,” he said. “Enough resources, enough people from the police, from my office, and the cities, to create a permanent and cost-effective solution across the country.” The team had indicated to their immediate superiors that they wanted to keep working together and make that happen, even if it meant working outside their own region. They asked for permission and time to keep working on the project and take it on the road. “This was a big deal, but the guys at the top seemed okay with it,” Dävid recalled, “which was encouraging.”

The reality turned out to be more complicated. “The farther we departed from our turf,” Dävid said, “the thornier it became.” For example, Dävid and Peter gave presentations to a number of Limburg mayors and police chiefs who peppered them with questions about the operational and financial aspects. Those questions were hard to answer, and Dävid realized the team was not going to be able to come back with satisfactory information. Their superiors had given them some time and resources, but not enough to make a solid business plan and a scaling strategy.

Over the course of 2017, having carried out operations for another year, the team began to break up. One by one, everyone but Peter, from Enexis, departed. “There was no collective decision,” Dävid said, “it just happened. We worked on separate locations in different organizations and had a lot on our plates.”

For Dävid, letting go had not been easy, especially as he tried to continue monitoring the work while staying in the background. He reflected, “Trying not to do it all yourself anymore, but to make sure someone will do it for you—that was hard.”