

HUMAN TRAFFICKING, ILLICIT CANNABIS CULTIVATION IN THE UNITED STATES & CHINA

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Human trafficking is a crime and a problem worldwide, to include the United States. Whether as a forced manual labor workforce or the trafficking of individuals for the illicit sex market, these are crimes against human dignity. Most recently these crimes have been associated to illicit cannabis cultivation sites, in the United States, operated by individuals or Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) with ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Human Trafficking Defined:

"Sex trafficking is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age." (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A))

"Forced labor is the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery." (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(B))¹

Human trafficking is often expressed as a form of modern slavery or referred to as a form of "debt" bondage.

Human Trafficking, Cannabis, & Foreign Nationals: Common Patterns

*"Labor trafficking in marijuana production remains a concealed epidemic within the expanding cannabis industry."*²

Many of these individuals share a common story of being from the PRC, seeking employment during the COVID epidemic or seeking to improve their economic position. Common patterns of trafficking include:

- The desire, or need, of an individual to leave their home country for their own safety or seeking to improve their financial situation.
- Perceiving an opportunity to meet this goal from targeted postings placed on social media platforms, by traffickers, such as the China-based app "WeChat".
- The willingness to pay a third party (an agent) a substantial sum of cash to facilitate undocumented travel.
- In some cases, entering into an agreement (a contract) with the agent to work off their travel "debts" over a specified period by working as / where directed.
- Surreptitious travel routes and plans that terminate at an illicit cannabis grow site.
- Confiscation of personal identification and property, such as identity cards, cell phones, or passports to hinder the individual from leaving or engaging in unsupervised communication with the outside world.
- Being forced to work and live, often under duress, in an unhealthy environment (e.g., unsanitary living conditions, long work hours, and exposures to chemicals, pesticides, fumigants used in cultivation of marijuana.)



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Human Trafficking: An overview of its phases

Recent research into human trafficking, associated to cannabis illegal cultivation, in the United Kingdom defines the overall trafficking process into three (3) distinct stages:

- **Recruitment and entry**
 - "...traffickers identify and lure victims through methods such as deception, coercion, or exploiting vulnerabilities."
- **Controlling or maintenance**
 - "...traffickers maintain power over victims through threats, violence, psychological manipulation, or debt bondage, ensuring continued exploitation.
- **Rescue or escape**
 - "...rescue or escape phase occurs when victims are freed, either through their own escape or
 - by intervention from authorities or organizations,
 - often requiring significant aftercare and support for recovery and reintegration."³

Human Trafficking and Cannabis Cultivation in the United States: Examples

New Mexico

September 2020 – Shiprock, N.M. (Navajo tribal lands)

A cannabis cultivation farm, with hundreds of industrial sized greenhouses, was being tended by local Navajo children ages 10 – 14 and nearly 1,000 Chinese immigrants living in flimsy trailers. They provided manual labor during their 10-hour shifts starting as early as 7:30 am, for as little as \$5 an hour. The operation was overseen by Chinese managers, many of which were armed. The workers, including children, carried heavy bags of soil, operated heavy equipment, and handled hazardous chemicals. Tribal authorities shut the operation down by court order in late September 2020.⁴

New Mexico

October 2020 – Farmington N.M.

Local police investigate a tip regarding a man moving large amounts of bulk marijuana from a truck into rooms at a local "budget motel". Police discovered numerous rooms were being used by 17 Chinese national men & women who were pruning nearly a ton raw cannabis plants. One of the Chinese immigrants told police he lost his job due to COVID pandemic. He said that he heard about this opportunity to make money from "a friend" but others there had been recruited through "job agencies". He was never told the operation was illegal. These people were enticed from low-income Chinese areas in Southern California as laborers, they were given deceptive information about the job, and some paid significant amounts of money as a laborer / investor into the venture. It was determined this incident was linked to the Shiprock operation noted above.⁵



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Oklahoma

October 2022 – Oklahoma City, OK.

Local police investigate a small residence in Oklahoma City only to discover that it was being used as a house of prostitution since 2018. The house was supervised by a Chinese national man (F. Jiang) and staffed by women, trafficked into the United States from China, to serve as prostitutes. Many of these women were told they had legitimate jobs waiting for them only to discover that was not the case. The location catered to the managers and leaders from some of the local marijuana farms operated by other Chinese-based groups. Jiang pled no contest to two counts of human trafficking for commercial sex, possession of proceeds (\$19,000) from unlawful activity and was sentenced to 20 years confinement.⁶

Maine & Massachusetts

2023 - 2024

During 2024, law enforcement identified nearly 300 cannabis farms located in rural central Maine. Most grows were found in either residential properties or in outlying buildings found on the properties. The organization was determined to have links to organized crime in China. To date, seven people have been charged with illegal cultivation of marijuana, money laundering, and human trafficking of aliens. Specifically, the smuggling Chinese nationals across the U.S. / Mexico border to serve as a forced labor workforce at cannabis grow sites in Maine and Massachusetts. The identification papers and passports of these smuggled individuals were seized by the defendant(s) as a means of controlling the workforce.⁷

Human Trafficking Resources

To learn more about human trafficking, how to identify trafficking victims, resources available to victims and for law enforcement in the field, see the following resources:

The National Human Trafficking Hotline

Connects victims and survivors of sex and labor trafficking with services and supports to get help and stay safe.

Phone: 1-888-373-7888

Email: help@humantraffickinghotline.org.

Website: <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/en>

The U.S. Department of Justice – Human Trafficking website

Resources for victims (adults and minors), educational publications, training, & technical assistance.

Website: <https://www.justice.gov/humantrafficking/resources#training>

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Human Trafficking Resources - Continued

U.S. Department of Homeland Security – Blue Campaign

A public resource dedicated to disrupting human trafficking and exploitation with educational material, free online video training, victim resources (English and Spanish) and more.

Website: <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/about-blue-campaign>

Polaris Project

A nonprofit organization since 2007 with a focus on increasing public awareness and providing educational materials on assisting victims of human trafficking and exploitation. Polaris established the National Human Trafficking Hotline (1-888-373-7888) and its website provides resources into understanding and identifying trafficking for labor or sex. Much of the material is available in English, Spanish, and in Mandarin.

Website: <https://polarisproject.org>

Be sure to check your state for local programs and resources available to address those victimized by human trafficking.

This briefing bulletin provided a cursory overview of the issue of human trafficking and its association to illicit cannabis trafficking in the United States. How some individuals or criminal organizations, with ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC), have engaged in human trafficking for a on demand workforce. It is important to note that this type of criminal conduct is not specific just to individuals from China and can involve any nationality. The first step in combating human trafficking is the ability recognize it, then having the resources to address it.

To learn more about recent information regarding illicit cannabis trafficking domestically and criminal factions with ties to the PRC, please visit our website: www.themig.org.



The Marijuana Impact Group (MIG) is a federally funded initiative with the High Intensity Drug Trafficking Areas (HIDTA) program.

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Endnotes:

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