

Most pot dispensaries are forced to be cash-only. Now they're prime targets for violent robberies



Members of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department collect evidence at a marijuana dispensary in Walnut Park in June. The shop's owner shot and wounded two men trying to rob the store, authorities said. (Mark Boster / Los Angeles Times)

By **Rick Anderson**

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The recent killing of a marijuana store security guard in Colorado and the wounding of another guard in San Bernardino are the latest examples of the crime lure posed by cash-only pot dispensaries, industry observers say.

But while those armed robbery attempts and a pot store shootout in Walnut Park in Los Angeles County were unfolding last month, Democratic-sponsored legislation that could have led to more dispensaries offering plastic and electronic payments in lieu of cash was blocked by House Republicans.

“Moments such as this,” said security expert Michael Jerome of Blue Line Protection Group, referring to the recent killing of 24-year-old Colorado pot store guard Travis Mason, “remind us that the cash-based nature of the legal cannabis industry here in Colorado makes these dispensaries and cultivation facilities prime targets.”

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A former Marine with a wife and three children, Mason was shot in the head on June 19 by two armed robbers at the Green Heart pot dispensary in Aurora, a Denver suburb. It was his second week on the job.

The would-be robbers, who fled without any money, are still being sought. Rewards totaling \$12,000 have been offered for their capture.

“This incredibly sad situation underscores the public safety risk faced by our industry due to the fact that we don’t have access to banking,” Michael Elliott, executive director of the Marijuana Industry Group, told the Aurora Sentinel.

That risk was underscored on June 8 when a Walnut Park medical marijuana dispensary owner survived a shootout with two would-be robbers. On his security camera, the owner spotted the two men arriving with masks and armored vests, according to a Los Angeles County sheriff’s spokesman. One was carrying an assault rifle. The owner drew his own gun and wounded the two as they entered. The owner escaped unharmed.

Santa Ana police recently announced a \$100,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of a suspect in the shooting of another marijuana dispensary owner, Derek Worden, 48, who survived two bullet wounds outside his store in November.

Police said anonymous donors provided the reward money after the investigation stalled. Worden’s dispensary had been open for just four months. The shooter ran off without any money, officials said.

Crime statistics concerning legal dispensaries are hard to come by as the industry expands, and, understandably, operators are reluctant to talk about how much cash they can have on hand. But in a late-night Seattle dispensary break-in last year, for example, thieves got away with \$100,000 in cash, police said.

Recreational use of marijuana is dominated by Western states – it’s legal in Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Alaska and Washington, D.C. Altogether, 25 states and the District of Columbia allow some form of recreational or medical marijuana use.

California, Nevada and six other states could make marijuana legal in a majority of U.S. states in November when they vote on legalization measures. Marijuana Business Daily reports that potential ballot measures loom in another six states, and predicts that legal pot could become an \$8-billion industry in the U.S. by 2018.

But marijuana use remains illegal under federal law, causing most banks to steer clear of the industry. As a result, most dispensaries must deal in cash.

The Senate recently approved legislation to protect banks against repercussions if they do business with marijuana dispensaries, but a Republican-controlled committee blocked a similar amendment in the House.

One of the co-sponsors, Rep. Dennis Heck (D-Wash.), mentioned slain Colorado pot store guard Travis Mason after the GOP action. Heck told the National Journal that “every single member who opposed allowing this amendment ought to have that young man’s name tattooed on their body to remind them.”

More banks are opening their vaults to pot entrepreneurs, the Associated Press reports. In March, 300 financial institutions were working with marijuana companies, based on federal data. That compares to 51 in March 2014.

But cash-only remains a business hazard. Four days after Mason’s killing in Colorado, a 35-year-old San Bernardino medical marijuana dispensary guard was shot in the head. He survived but remains in critical condition. Three armed robbers got away with a haul of cash.

That was similar to a robbery last year at a San Bernardino dispensary, except in that case, the guard, Anthony Victor Pineda, 25, died from his wounds, police said. The robbers fled with the cash.

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