# High-strength US cannabis flooding UK market fuels crime surge



High-strength cannabis from the United States is making its way to the UK, presenting a major challenge for law enforcement agencies. Last year, British authorities seized around 27 tonnes of this contraband at major airports, a remarkable fivefold increase from the previous year's figures. Much of this influx stems from legal cannabis farms in America, and this unexpected reverse flow of drugs is creating significant headaches for law enforcement.

According to narcotics expert, Peter Walsh, this change illustrates a fascinating market dynamic. Historically, the US served primarily as a consumer market for cannabis, importing significant amounts of the drug illegally. Since legalisation in various states, however, a surplus has emerged, allowing organized crime syndicates to exploit both the supply and demand across the Atlantic. Walsh noted, “This export phenomenon will likely continue as financial circumstances in the US, particularly currency fluctuations, make American-grown cannabis increasingly attractive to British gangs.”

Indeed, figures from the National Crime Agency reveal a worrying trend. Their data shows that organised crime has taken advantage of the burgeoning legal markets in places like California and Canada, which leads to the recruitment of unsuspecting couriers. These individuals often mistakenly believe that importing cannabis into the UK will result in mere fines, oblivious to the severe legal repercussions they face, which can be as harsh as 14 years in prison. A recent case involved Raekelle Powell, a professional volleyball player caught with £600,000 worth of cannabis in her suitcase, who was sentenced to 15 months behind bars after being misled about the legality of her actions.

The surge in cannabis smuggling is not solely an issue of legal ramifications; it raises concerns about the broader implications of drug trafficking. Organised crime groups are capitalising on this lucrative market, sometimes involving individuals who may not fit the stereotype of traditional criminals. For instance, Nicholas Panayiotou and Eleanar Attard, who previously gained fame as winners of a reality cooking show, were involved in a conspiracy to smuggle cannabis into the country. Their case demonstrates the diverse backgrounds of those participating in this illicit trade, which often blurs the lines between legality and criminality.

Moreover, the information below the surface reveals systemic issues. Many cannabis farms operating illegally within the UK utilise slave labour, highlighting a dark underbelly to the burgeoning drug trade. As demand for cannabis remains strong—especially among those aged 16 to 59—domestic production continues to flourish alongside imports.

The British market remains particularly attractive for such drugs, characterised by perceptions of higher quality compared to locally grown products, further encouraging smuggling activities. The NCA has ramped up efforts to communicate the severe risks associated with cannabis importation, emphasising that potential couriers must grapple with the reality of substantial prison sentences if caught.

As the recent trend in smuggling continues to grow, the legalisation of cannabis elsewhere—such as in Canada and certain US states—suggests that this phenomenon will not abate anytime soon. With organised crime adapting to shifting laws worldwide, further recommendations for public awareness and stringent enforcement are likely necessary to combat the ongoing challenge posed by international drug trafficking networks.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
2. Paragraphs 2, 5, 6
3. Paragraph 2
4. Paragraph 2
5. Paragraphs 2, 7
6. Paragraph 3
7. Paragraph 3

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14635801/American-export-making-millions-UK-drug-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
* <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/smugglers-prevented-from-bringing-27-tonnes-of-cannabis-into-the-uk-in-2024> - In 2024, the National Crime Agency (NCA) intercepted nearly 27 tonnes of cannabis smuggled into the UK, a fivefold increase from 2023. The majority of these seizures occurred at Heathrow Airport, with significant amounts also found at Manchester and Birmingham airports. The NCA attributes this surge to organized crime groups exploiting legal cannabis markets in countries like the USA, Canada, and Thailand, recruiting couriers to transport the drug to the UK, where it commands higher profits. The agency warns potential couriers of severe legal consequences, including up to 14 years in prison for cannabis importation.
* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/28/legal-cannabis-abroad-blamed-surge-smuggling-uk/> - The decriminalization of cannabis in countries such as the USA, Canada, and Thailand has led to a significant rise in smuggling attempts into the UK. The National Crime Agency reported that cannabis seizures at UK airports tripled in the past year, with 15 tonnes seized in 2024 compared to 5 tonnes in 2023. Organized crime groups are capitalizing on the overproduction of cannabis in these legalized markets, recruiting couriers to transport the drug to the UK, where it can be sold at higher prices. Couriers are often misled into believing they will face only fines if caught, unaware of the severe legal penalties, including up to 14 years in prison.
* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/04/cannabis-seizures-heathrow-surge-amid-rise-cheap-californian/> - The legalization of cannabis in certain US states, particularly California, has led to a surge in smuggling attempts into the UK. Customs officials at Heathrow Airport seized nearly half a tonne of cannabis over a 10-day period, with passengers arriving from Los Angeles carrying large quantities in their luggage. The high potency and lower prices of Californian cannabis have made it attractive to UK consumers, prompting organized crime groups to exploit this demand. The National Crime Agency emphasizes the significant profits from smuggling US-grown cannabis into the UK, where it is viewed as a higher-quality product.
* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/article/2024/aug/28/amount-cannabis-seized-uk-airports-triples-national-crime-agency> - The National Crime Agency reports a significant increase in cannabis seizures at UK airports, with about 15 tonnes intercepted in 2024, up from 5 tonnes in 2023. This surge is attributed to overproduction in countries where cannabis has been legalized, such as the USA, Canada, and Thailand. Organized crime groups are exploiting these markets by recruiting couriers to transport the drug to the UK, where it can be sold at higher prices. The NCA warns potential couriers of severe legal consequences, including up to 14 years in prison for cannabis importation.
* <https://news.sky.com/story/cannabis-couriers-duped-by-traffickers-into-thinking-uk-authorities-are-soft-on-the-drug-nca-says-13204526> - The National Crime Agency (NCA) reports that many cannabis couriers are being misled by traffickers into believing that UK authorities are lenient on cannabis importation, leading to a significant rise in smuggling attempts. Couriers, often arriving from countries where cannabis is legal, are recruited by organized crime groups to transport the drug to the UK, where it can be sold at higher prices. The NCA warns that couriers face severe legal consequences, including up to 14 years in prison, and urges the public to report any information on drug smuggling.
* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-64321154> - The National Crime Agency (NCA) has increased security measures for travelers flying from Los Angeles to London following a series of cannabis-smuggling arrests. Since January 10, NCA investigators have seized over 400 kg of cannabis, with at least 11 passengers charged with attempting to import the drug into the UK. The NCA emphasizes that while it is legal to grow cannabis in California, importing it into the UK is illegal and carries severe penalties, including up to 14 years in prison.