Summary

Several years ago, Bovenkerk (2001) and Bovenkerk & Hogewind (2003) painted an alarming picture of the stranglehold on cannabis cultivation in the Netherlands supposedly exerted by organised criminal groups. In 2004, the government took up their findings in the so-called ‘Cannabis Letter’, which announced a range of measures to curb professional cannabis cultivation. As a result, a pilot project was launched in the south of the Netherlands, in particular aimed at tackling organised crime in relation to cannabis cultivation.

In light of this project, further research was requested into the organisation of the cultivation of cannabis and the groups behind it, as well as into possible novel intervention strategies. The research was carried out by Erasmus University Rotterdam and the University of Tilburg, from July 2006 to March 2007. The files pertaining to nineteen closed large-scale criminal investigations were analysed and sixteen professional cannabis growers were interviewed. The researchers talked to police officers and representatives of other agencies involved in tackling cannabis cultivation, and also collected and analysed numerical data as well as a wide range of written material.

The present research focused, first of all, on the production process and the organisation of cannabis cultivation, and also paid attention to the international dimension and to violence in relation to the professional and large-scale cultivation of cannabis. The second central theme was the official approach to cannabis cultivation. The researchers examined current police efforts in the regions of North Brabant, South-East Brabant, North Limburg and South Limburg, as well as the effects of their actions to date.

The production process
The logistic process of cultivating and trading cannabis basically entails ten steps: acquiring grow equipment; acquiring cuttings; setting up a grow room; diverting electricity; growing the plants; cutting the flowering tops; drying the tops; offering the harvest to a buyer; getting rid of hemp waste and, finally, the subsequent trading of the product.

A further analysis of the logistic process reveals that it is strongly ‘democratised’: there are many people who have the necessary knowledge and skills to cultivate cannabis. Furthermore, most of the materials required for the production of cannabis are widely used in other applications, with perhaps the sole exception of the carbon filter used to eliminate the pungent cannabis odour, a device not many private individuals outside the world of cannabis would seem to be in need of. It appears that grow shops in particular seem to facilitate the production process. They usually supply all the necessary legal cultivation equipment and they also give advice to growers. None of these activities are currently punishable by law. However, there are also a number of mala fide grow shops that will refer prospective cannabis growers to sellers of cuttings,
wholesale cannabis buyers and service providers such as electricians or ‘grow room builders’. They also collect hemp waste from cannabis growers. Some of these grow shops go one step further: they will deliver cuttings on the spot and buy harvested cannabis from the growers. There is no denying that these practices lower the threshold for citizens to engage in cannabis cultivation. Further analysis points to a large majority of grow shops in the south of the Netherlands being involved (or having been involved in the last 5 years) in violations of the Opium Law in one way or another.

The organisation behind cannabis cultivation

In the organisation of professional cannabis cultivation four principal variations can be distinguished. Firstly, independent growers who operate at their own risk and use their own money to grow anywhere between 100 and 1,000 plants on their own premises. To acquire grow supplies or cuttings they either go to grow shops or appeal to their social network. The same goes for assistance in building up a grow room or illegally diverting electricity. The harvest is either sold directly to coffee shops or offered to grow shops and other buyers.

Secondly, larger-scale independent growers who operate plantations in (rented) commercial properties or, for instance, farm sheds, where 1,000 plants or more are cultivated.

Thirdly, operators who install five to ten plantations in other people’s houses, mostly acquaintances in their social network. With the occasional exception, there is no coercion involved in the running of these plantations. Often several operators employ the same ‘grow room builders’, electricians and cutters. While the focus of their activities is at a local level, they sometimes install plantations in a wider area or across the border, depending on their social network. These operators usually first gained the necessary experience in cannabis cultivation and made substantial profits from it themselves. They are then approached by others with the request to install a ‘small garden’ for them.

Finally, criminal cooperatives which are involved in buying, processing and selling cannabis products on a large scale and, in addition, often run their own sizeable plantations. They have one or more grow shops at their disposal, or a less visible address where independent growers or operators can deliver their harvests. The nature and quality of the product is of little importance, as these criminal cooperatives will buy both dried and undried cannabis of varying quality, as well as unprocessed plants. The intermediary products are processed by the cooperatives themselves. The finished product is largely exported but also sold domestically to coffee shops in the Netherlands, sometimes through middlemen.

The key figures in these criminal cooperatives have the contacts needed to sell large amounts of cannabis both at home and abroad. A turnover of 100 to 200 kilos per week is not unusual. Financial investigations revealed
that sometimes tens of millions of euros were amassed in the span of only a few years. As a rule, the central players in these cooperatives have earned their spurs in serious crime. The investigation revealed examples of illegal contracting, armed robbery and the production of synthetic drugs, as well as convictions for murder and firing at police officers. Measures taken to conceal their operations from the outside world are similar to those used in the production and trade of hard drugs. The cooperatives do not hesitate to use extreme violence against ‘business partners’ who fail to keep their end of the bargain in one way or another. Criminal cooperatives play an important role in the world behind the cultivation of cannabis, not because they force people into installing plantations in their homes, but because they provide an assured market to independent growers and operators. They offer growers and operators an opportunity to cultivate cannabis in the knowledge that they will have no difficulty selling their harvest.

**International dimensions**

A considerable share of the cannabis produced in the Netherlands finds its way to foreign buyers. Large numbers of drug tourists from Belgium, Germany and France visit the coffee shops in Dutch border communities. Estimates from various regions put the number at thousands of visitors per day. Apart from these individual users, there are drug couriers who travel to and from the Netherlands every day, carrying several hundred grams to tens of kilos of cannabis. It appears from criminal investigations relating to Germany that these couriers make the journey on behalf of small and medium-sized dealers operating in German towns and cities. Regular border patrols by, among others, the Joint Hit Team usually result in one or more drug couriers being intercepted, but the risk of getting caught is generally low.

Another international dimension of cannabis cultivation relates to Dutch involvement in plantations in other countries. In particular, in Belgium more cannabis plantations are discovered every year, thus raising the question whether there is a conscious shift of cannabis cultivation to this country. This assumption could not be confirmed on the basis of the current research findings. Some independent growers stated during interviews that Belgium was indeed an attractive country because of the reduced chance of being caught by the police. However, an analysis of the modus operandi of individual operators and criminal cooperatives showed that their actions are largely driven by opportunistic motives: plantations are set up wherever a suitable location can be found. It should be mentioned here that in recent years an increasing number of Dutch citizens (among them aspiring cannabis growers) have bought houses in Belgium.

Finally, mala fide grow shops do not limit themselves to only advising Dutch cannabis growers; they are equally willing to offer their expertise
to foreign customers. Frequently, the inventory of Belgian or German plantations turns out to have been purchased from Dutch grow shops. The available data were insufficient to determine whether or not grow shop activities, especially in the border region, lead to a growing number of Belgians and Germans turning to cannabis cultivation.

Violence related to cannabis cultivation
Bovenkerk and Hogewind (2003) conclude that, particularly in neglected urban areas, people were being coerced into cultivating cannabis. These findings attracted considerable attention. For this reason, violence related to cannabis cultivation was examined more closely in the present research.
First of all, the abovementioned conclusion with regard to ‘vertical violence,’ that is: violence by operators directed at growers, could not be confirmed. Operators usually have no trouble finding home growers and candidates willing to start a plantation within their own social network. Only one instance of vertical violence was found. The case concerned an operator who suspected a grower of stealing some of his plants. ‘Horizontal violence’ between criminal cooperatives resulted largely from business disputes, such as non-payment or failure to honour agreements. The precise cause of outbursts of violence could not always be established.
By far the most violence related to cannabis cultivation proved to result from the looting of plantations (‘rip-offs’). There are no figures available for theft from plantations, but from the interviews with growers it appears that the risk is real. When thieves are caught in the act, they are frequently faced with extreme violence. The victims of theft often make an effort to track down the culprits themselves. Suspicion generally falls on those who rendered assistance in setting up the plantation and were therefore aware of its location as well as the ideal harvest time.

The approach to cannabis cultivation
At present, the approach to cannabis cultivation in the south of the Netherlands is mainly focused on individual cannabis plantations. In 2005, the police destroyed 1,304 plantations in the regions North Brabant, South-East Brabant, North Limburg and South Limburg, according to the Dienst Nationale Recherche Informatie (National Investigation Information Service). The four police regions themselves arrived at a total of 1,443, while the largest energy supplier in the area assessed additional charges against 1,378 customers in the regions concerned. The difference between the numbers is mainly due to the lack of an unambiguous definition of the concept ‘cannabis plantation’. In by far the most cases, the plantations were found in private homes (80 to 90 percent), and nearly all of these were rented premises.
In some of the larger municipalities in the south of the Netherlands and in the countryside in the district of Venray in the police region North Limburg, an integral approach is being used, which means that various official bodies work together, such as local councils, the police, public prosecutors, the tax department, social services, housing corporations, et cetera. The risk of being evicted from rented premises especially appears to act as a deterrent. In the interviews, cannabis growers agreed that fewer people are now willing to set up a plantation in their homes as a result of this. The impact on the number of plantations discovered by the police, or a possible shift to other locations – commercial premises, privately owned properties, locations abroad – could not yet be determined. In this context, it should be observed that these ‘cannabis covenants’ are still far from having been signed across the board.

It appears that operators running five to ten cannabis plantations are only sporadically the object of a criminal investigation. For one thing, the police often have no clear view of their activities. Furthermore, these cases are generally assigned a lower investigative priority than violent crimes, serial burglaries, et cetera.

Finally, the criminal cooperatives involved in the cultivation and trade of cannabis are being investigated to a certain degree. In the police regions North Brabant and South-East Brabant, several major criminal investigations have been conducted at the level of the regional criminal investigation department. Elsewhere, these criminal groups have been the object of short-term investigations. However, there is no systematic investigative pressure on these cooperatives. A major problem involves the effectiveness of this type of investigation: members of criminal cooperatives who restrict themselves to cannabis cultivation often receive a relatively low sentence and usually find it easy to resume their illegal activities after serving a short time in prison. This is why the criminal investigation services are currently trying to focus their efforts on the seizure of unlawfully obtained assets, but the results of this approach remain to be seen.

**Summary of possible interventions**

- The integral approach to individual cannabis plantations seems to produce results, although its precise effects are not yet known. This approach focuses mainly on home growers, who are either operating at their own risk, using their own money, or offer floor space to operators. Assuming that demands of the cannabis market are not about to change in any significant way, it can be expected that changes will occur in the organisation of cannabis cultivation. It is conceivable that there will be an increase in measures to conceal plantations and that cannabis cultivation will move to safer locations. It is of the utmost importance to carefully monitor the possible occurrence of these consequences.
– Grow shops significantly lower the threshold for cannabis cultivation. More restraints should be imposed on the illegal activities of some of these shops. It is also advisable to further examine the possibility of banning the sale of materials solely used to conceal cannabis plantations from the outside world.

– At the moment, operators running several plantations are rarely investigated. It is advisable to try and survey the networks from which home growers are recruited and subsequently intervene through short-term criminal investigations or the seizure of luxury goods on the basis of article 420b Sr.

– Criminal cooperatives have access to a large market, both at home and abroad. This constitutes a form of capital only available to a select few. The prominent position of the cooperatives in the world of cannabis cultivation derives from their trading relations. Normally, police strategies are aimed at combating the lucrative trade through tackling cultivation. But this strategy could also be redirected to tackling the trade first, in order to curb the lucrative cultivation. It should be possible to hamper criminal cooperatives by targeting both the addresses where they purchase other people's harvests, as well as the large plantations they run themselves. In addition to this, police investigations should focus more systematically on these cooperatives, also in regions where this is currently not being done. Financial investigations could play a crucial role in such an exercise.