

DEA Tracks ‘Chinese Grows’ in New Cannabis Enforcement Report

DEA Enforcement Steady in 2024 as Agency Tracks ‘Chinese Grows’ for the First Time

Cannabis Plant Eradications and Arrests Show Little Change from Previous Years

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has released new data on its marijuana enforcement efforts through its Domestic Cannabis Eradication / Suppression Program (DCE/SP), revealing relatively steady activity in 2024 compared to previous years. While the national numbers do not reflect the peak of anti-cannabis enforcement seen a decade ago, they still indicate significant federal involvement in marijuana-related crackdowns.

In 2024, the DEA reported a total of 16,330 cannabis cultivation sites eradicated, with 14,904 outdoor grow sites and 1,426 indoor operations dismantled. Over 5.3 million marijuana plants were seized, resulting in 5,764 arrests and the confiscation of 3,125 weapons.

While many states have legalized cannabis for medical or recreational use, the federal government continues to enforce marijuana prohibition, especially targeting large-scale unlicensed grows—often tied to organized operations. However, the effectiveness and priorities of these enforcement actions remain subjects of ongoing debate.

Federal Marijuana Enforcement Still Lags in Transparency

The release of the 2024 data ends a notable gap in DEA reporting. Critics pointed out that the agency had failed to provide updated data for more than a year and a half, with the last official update appearing in May 2023. Furthermore, the DEA appears to have removed its 2022 statistical report from its website, and the 2023 report contains suspiciously blank entries for multiple states.

This lack of consistent and transparent data has drawn criticism from cannabis advocacy organizations. Many see it as an example of the federal government’s reluctance to fully disclose the scope and cost of enforcing cannabis prohibition at a time when public opinion and state laws continue shifting toward legalization.

New Focus in 2024: DEA Begins Tracking ‘Chinese Grows’ Separately

For the first time, the DEA’s DCE/SP report includes a new category labeled “Chinese Grows.” This refers to marijuana cultivation sites allegedly operated or financed by Chinese nationals or organizations. The 2024 data shows 15 such operations targeted for enforcement, with the highest concentrations in Washington State

(5) and Oregon (4).

This addition follows a wave of media and political attention focused on the alleged involvement of Chinese criminal groups in illicit marijuana production in states like Maine and California. However, critics note that 15 sites is a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of illicit grow operations targeted in the U.S. annually.

Paul Armentano, deputy director of NORML, questioned the singling out of Chinese involvement while other international players, such as Mexican cartels, have historically played significant roles in U.S.-based illicit grows but were never categorized this way in prior DEA reports.

Data Gaps Remain as Key States Are Missing From the 2024 Report

Notably, some states with reportedly high levels of illicit cannabis activity—including Maine, which media outlets have described as a hotbed for Chinese-financed grow operations—are entirely absent from the DEA's 2024 dataset.

Federal investigations in Maine and Massachusetts recently led to charges against several Chinese nationals in marijuana trafficking cases, though those arrests likely occurred too late to be included in the 2024 data. Still, the absence of key states leaves gaps in understanding the true national enforcement landscape.

This incomplete data weakens the DEA's claims about targeting specific foreign threats and undermines the agency's credibility in providing a comprehensive picture of marijuana enforcement across the country.

Cannabis Seizures at U.S. Border Continue to Decline

Separately, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported that cannabis seizures at the southern border fell by 29% in 2023, with agents confiscating around 61,000 pounds of marijuana. This continues a downward trend that began several years ago, coinciding with the growing number of states legalizing cannabis.

Similarly, the U.S. Sentencing Commission has tracked a steep decline in federal marijuana trafficking cases, dropping from around 5,000 in 2013 to 806 in 2022, with a further decline projected in 2023. These statistics reinforce the idea that legal state markets have diminished the demand for illicit cannabis smuggling into the U.S.

DEA Continues Anti-Cannabis Messaging Campaigns Despite Shifting Legal Landscape

In parallel with its enforcement actions, the DEA has continued to promote a series of anti-cannabis public messaging campaigns, often drawing criticism for their outdated or alarmist tone. Most recently, after the confirmation of Terrance Cole as the new DEA administrator, the agency published new content linking cannabis use to mental health risks such as depression and suicidal ideation.

While Cole stated during his confirmation that marijuana rescheduling would be a priority, his first public statements as DEA chief did not mention cannabis policy at all.

The agency also recently revived older campaigns, including an initiative to help parents “decode” drug-related emojis, and participated in National Prevention Week by promoting memes warning of cannabis as a “gateway drug.” One campaign, “Just Say Know,” hosted by Johnny's Ambassadors and promoted on DEA

websites, shared questionable claims about the dangers of marijuana concentrates.

DEA's Marijuana Enforcement in the Biden Era: A Conflicted Stance

The Biden administration has publicly supported a review of cannabis scheduling and has tasked the DEA with holding hearings on potentially rescheduling marijuana from Schedule I to a lower tier. This move would represent a significant shift in federal policy.

However, the agency's delayed and incomplete enforcement reports, combined with continued anti-cannabis campaigns, send mixed signals about its willingness to embrace policy reform. DEA's historical stance on cannabis prohibition, coupled with new efforts to monitor "Chinese Grows," suggests a federal agency still very much engaged in the war on marijuana—even as many state and local governments turn away from it.

A Need for Clarity and Consistency in Federal Cannabis Enforcement

The DEA's 2024 DCE/SP report reflects the ongoing complexity of federal cannabis enforcement in a rapidly evolving legal landscape. While total enforcement actions have plateaued compared to earlier years, new categories like "Chinese Grows" reveal evolving priorities and narratives.

Still, with incomplete data, ongoing public misinformation campaigns, and no clear direction from the new DEA leadership on marijuana reform, stakeholders remain frustrated. Advocacy groups, lawmakers, and the public are calling for greater transparency, clearer enforcement priorities, and alignment with the realities of modern cannabis policy.

Until then, the DEA's role in shaping the future of cannabis in the U.S. will likely remain contested, with enforcement statistics offering only part of the story.

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