

KEEPING ILLEGAL DRUGS OUT OF RENTAL PROPERTIES

A guide for property managers

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Introduction

South Wales Police are working to develop ways of targeting drug crime and solving problems such as fear of crime in the community.

There is obvious concern about the negative effects that the use, supply and production of illegal drugs can have on our communities.

It is well known that organised crime gangs, particularly those involved in drug production, seek to distance themselves from any illegal activity that could lead to them being arrested.

A convenient way of doing this is involvement in rental premises.

This guide outlines how property managers, landlords and owners, can work with South Wales Police to tackle drug problems in rental properties and thereby prevent problems for local residents.

There is no simple solution to the problem of illegal drug use, manufacturing or trafficking. We all need to work together to make the community safer.

This guide contains information on some of the indicators that may show that synthetic drugs, such as amphetamine or Ecstasy, may be being made in clandestine (secret/hidden) laboratories. Cannabis crops may be being grown indoors or outdoors, or that drug trafficking is being conducted from rental properties.



The Costs of Drug Activity in Rental Properties

When drug criminals operate out of rental properties the local neighbourhood suffer, with property managers and landlords, paying a high price.

That price may include the following:

Reductions in property values, particularly when the illegal activity begins affecting the reputation of the neighbourhood.

- Adverse profile on the manager/company and reluctance of property owners to place their properties in the hands of the manager/company.
- Loss of rent, during eviction and repair periods.
- Fear and frustration, from dealing with hostile tenants.
- Property damage, arising from abuse, retaliation or neglect and increased property insurance premiums.
- Penalties, including asset seizure by police, loss of property.
- use and property damage resulting from police raids.
- Toxic contamination, and/or fire or floods in the property resulting from drug manufacturing or growing operations.
- Increased resentment, and anger between neighbours and property owners.
- Complaints, from neighbours which result in regular police attendance.

Understanding the signs of Drug Activity in Properties

Amphetamines (sometimes called 'Speed' or 'Whizz') come in many forms: tablets, capsules, liquids, powders or crystal (sometimes called 'Ice').

Rented properties such as houses, garages, factory units and caravans have all been discovered as sites for illegal drug manufacturing and growing operations.

Although some laboratories are large scale, all the equipment necessary for making 'speed' may be assembled on a space no bigger than a kitchen table.

Once a criminal group has employed a 'drug cook', collected the chemicals and set up the equipment, it doesn't take long to establish a clandestine laboratory to make the drug.

Clandestine lab operators favour locations that offer extra privacy. In rural settings, sheds or houses well away from other residences offer such privacy. In urban settings, labs may be set up in houses with plenty of surrounding trees and shrubs to block views of the interior, or apartment or hotel units that are well away from the view of management.

However, while seclusion is preferred, clandestine labs have been found in virtually all types of rental properties.

Therefore, any location, which allows for privacy, is suitable for use as an illicit laboratory.

Poor standards of cleanliness and the chemicals used means the amphetamines produced often contain impurities harmful to people.

The following may indicate illegal drug manufacturing in a rented property:

Strong unpleasant or chemical odours

The presence of a strong cat urine-like smell or ammonia smell within the rental property. This smell is very similar to cat box odour and is unique to one method of methylamphetamine production.

Other odd chemical odours

The smell of other chemicals or solvents not typically associated with residential housing may be present.

Strong smell of de-odourisers or Air Fresheners

Drug producers will try to disguise the smell of their production. They will use commercial type automatic air fresheners, usually near the front entrance, to mask any smells from visitors to the property.

Chemical containers

Chemical drums or other chemical containers with their labels painted over may be present.

Many empty containers of over-the counter cold or allergy medicines

The average cold sufferer may leave one or two empty cold medicine containers in the bin. (for example – ‘Sudafed’ tablets) The presence of many such emptied out boxes, bottles or blister packs is a definite warning sign.

Duracell type Battery cases cut up, match striker plates torn off the boxes, excessive amounts of coffee filters with red staining, are all indicators of drug production.

Large amounts of powder

Drug producers use a variety of powders to ‘cut’ or adulterate their drugs, in order to increase their profits. These powders may be stored in tubs, sacks or boxes. They are usually in multi-kilo amounts.

Any powder can be used, but substances such as – Glucose, Lactose, Caffeine, Lignacaine, Benzocaine or Paracetamol are common. These substances are either bought from wholesalers, via the Internet, or stolen from legitimate suppliers.

The presence of any obvious evidence

The presence of syringes, cannabis plants, very small plastic bags – the type in which jewellery or beads are sometimes kept – that are not generally used in large quantities by most people, combined with other factors, should cause suspicion.

Chemistry equipment

The presence of flasks, beakers and rubber tubing, like those used in high school chemistry classes, in rental units or garbage. Few people practice chemistry as a hobby – if you see such articles, take it seriously.

Bottles or jugs used extensively for secondary purposes

For example, milk jugs and soft drink bottles or screw-top bottles full of unusual liquids.

Unusually sophisticated weighing scales, or Industrial type Mixers

The scales typically used by drug dealers, distributors and manufacturers are noticeably more sophisticated and accurate than household scales. Of course, there are legitimate reasons to have such scales so don’t consider such a scale, by itself, an indication of illegal activity. This also applies to Mixers.

Tinfoil or baking soda or a large number of electrical extension cords

Tinfoil is used in growing operations and methylamphetamine production. Baking soda (Bicarbonate) is used in methylamphetamine production and in other drug processes such as conversion of cocaine into “crack”. Electrical extension cords are used in methylamphetamine labs and growing operations.

Unusual fortification by a tenant of individual rooms

For example, tenants putting deadbolts or alarms on interior doors.

A willingness to install expensive – exterior fortifications

If your tenant wants to install window bars or fit extra locks to doors they may be interested in more than preventing burglary. Sometimes heavy metal bars or pieces of wood may be used to block entry through front and rear doors. The presence of such items in hallways or kitchens should set alarm bells ringing. Damage to walls, paint or wallpaper behind doors is a sign that such temporary re-enforcements are being used.

Smoke breaks

If other suspicious signs are present, individuals leaving the premises to smoke a cigarette may also be an indicator because chemicals are highly explosive. ‘Drug cooks’ must leave the lab before lighting up.

Infrequent occupation

Neighbours may notice that the residents of a property are not living full-time at the address, and are only visiting for a short time each day, or visiting every couple of days.

Cannabis Cultivation

Cannabis (marijuana/grass/weed/pot/skunk etc.) growing operations are hard to identify from the street. These operations are more likely to be found in houses rather than apartments as more space is needed to grow cannabis crops.

In addition to the general signs of excessive fortifications or overly paranoid behaviour, some other signs of growing cannabis are listed below.

The following indicators may be observed:

Electrical wiring that has been tampered with

For example, evidence of residents tampering with wiring and hooking directly into power lines.

Powerful lights on all day or night in the attic, roof space, basement or other rooms

Growers use powerful (600 watt) lights to speed up the development of the cannabis plants.

Windows blacked out

The use of black plastic or heavy fabric on windows (Usually hidden by nets curtains or blinds so as not to look suspicious from the street) may be an indicator.

A sudden jump or fall in electricity bills

As mentioned above, growing operations require special lighting, which will increase utility costs. Some growers will often divert the electricity or tamper with the meter to reduce their costs.

High Humidity in a Unit

Growing operations require a lot of moisture. In addition to feeling the humidity, landlords may observe peeling paint or mildewed wallboard or carpet. Heavy condensation at the windows may also be seen.

Large ducting tubes

These look like domestic 'Tumble Drier' outlet tubes, but are usually larger and silver coloured. They are used to either take the hot air out of the property, or bring fresh air in. They may be seen protruding out of a window.



Gas Cylinders

Carbon Dioxide (CO2) is used to enrich the atmosphere in cultivation rooms.

Rewiring efforts or bypassed circuitry

Again, growing operations require a lot of electricity. The extra circuitry for growing operations generally exceeds the power rating for the rental property and can burn out the wiring, resulting in fires or the need to rewire the property before you can rent it out again.

Scuffed paint or wallpaper

Indicating regular visits are being made to the loft.

Bin bags full of vegetable material being thrown away

The stalks and roots of cannabis plants are discarded when the plants are cropped. Plant pot shaped root balls may be dumped in the garden.

Other obvious signs

Other indicators include basements or cavities filled with plants, lights and reflective material (e.g. tinfoil) used to speed growing. You may also notice 'spares' (Bulbs, Lights) or Bags of soil (or Peat or Coco shells), or fertilizers stored in hallways, sheds or garages etc.

Other Drug Cultivation Indicators

The following signs are more general. They could be indicators of various types of illegal drug activity including drug distribution, manufacturing or growing.

Expensive vehicles

People in extremely expensive cars regularly visiting renters who appear less solvent may be significant.



Unusual fortification of a unit

Blacked-out windows, the internal taping down of curtains, window bars, extra deadbolts, and expensive alarm systems may be significant. Note that growing operators and 'drug cooks', in particular, often add fortifications - extra locks, bars on windows and thorough window coverings are typical.

Frequent visits to the premises, or trips away from the premises

This would be a significant sign only if the trips are made from a location where other indicators of drug activity are observed.

Firearms

The presence of weapons, of all types in the premises, may indicate drug activity. Drug dealers typically sell small quantities to many purchasers. Dealing locations are usually high traffic locations with each person buying a small amount of drugs.

Heavy traffic

For example, a number of cars and pedestrians stopping at a home for only brief periods. Traffic may be cyclical, increasing on weekends or late at night, or minimal for a few weeks and then intense for a period of a few days - particularly pay-days or days on which benefit is collected.

Exchanges of money

Cash and packets may be traded through windows, mail boxes or under doorways.

People bring valuables into the premises

Visitors regularly bring televisions, bicycles, DVD's and cameras - and leave empty handed.

Waiting in cars and use of odd parking locations

Visitors may sit in their cars for a while after leaving a residence or may leave one person in the car while the others visit. Visitors also may park around a corner or a few blocks away and approach on foot.

Lookouts

Frequently lookouts will be younger people who tend to hang around the property during heavy traffic periods described earlier.

Regular activity at extremely late hours

For example, noise and visitors between midnight and dawn.

Other obvious signs

These signs may include people exchanging small packets for cash, people using drugs while sitting in their cars, and syringes or other paraphernalia left in common areas or on neighbouring property.

Deterring Drug Activity

As part of your organisation's screening process of potential applicants, be aware of the following:

An applicant's willingness to pay rent months in advance, particularly in cash.

If an applicant offers you 6 months' rent in advance, resist the urge to accept, and require the person to go through the application process. By accepting cash without checking the applicant's background, you might have more money in the short run, but your rental unit may suffer damage and you may also damage the neighbourhood and the value of your long-term investment.

A tenant's tendency to pay in cash combined with a lack of visible means of support

Some honest people simply don't like writing cheques. However, if other warning signs are noted, and tenants possess large amounts of cash with no apparent source of income, be suspicious.

Any request from the tenant for you not to visit the premises

Often they will give seemingly plausible explanations for this request. This may be combined with a request to meet you to pay the rent, rather than you visiting the address.

The following advice will help to deter criminals from attempting to rent your property:

- Use a form of photo identification of potential applicants.
- Ensure identification has not been altered or is not fake.
- Watch for telephone accounts in different names.
- Check for water, gas and electricity accounts in different names.
- Require more than one type of identification for joint applications.
- Check prospective tenant's current address.
- Check prospective tenant's rental history.
- Obtain any mobile phone numbers of prospective tenants.
- Obtain car registration numbers.

Be aware that many drug criminals use a 'Front Couple'. These people will appear to be a genuine average respectable couple seeking to rent a property for their own use. After they have been shown around the property by the landlord and take possession of the property, they will disappear without trace. They will then be replaced by members of the drug gang who will then convert the property for drug production or cultivation.

Consider re-visiting the property a few weeks later to ensure that the person you rented to is in fact the occupier.

Preventing Drug Crime

Property managers may recommend these crime prevention steps to improve the environment around the property:

Keep the property visible

To increase the likelihood of illegal activity being observed. Actions that can be taken to increase natural surveillance include keeping shrubs trimmed so they do not block windows and porches, installing peepholes in front door for the protection of tenants.

Use lighting

Consider motion or light sensor lighting over all entrances and low energy outdoor lighting along walkways. Apartment complexes should have well lit walkways, activity and parking areas.

Display dwelling numbers

And/or building names clearly so police may find the correct address if called. High/low rise apartment blocks should be numbered with large, clearly visible numbers/names and be well lit.

Control traffic flow

And access as a prevention step. People involved in drug activity prefer 'drive through' parking lots - those with multiple exits. If a car park is private property have signs explaining that the parking is private, not public.

Encourage community involvement

When neighbours complain of suspicious activity, take notes of what they are saying.

Exchange phone numbers with neighbours

Landlords or property managers may not hear of dangerous or damaging activity on their property until neighbours have written to the council to complain or until the police have served a search warrant. Often such a situation could have been prevented if the property manager and the local neighbours had established better communication.

How to Report Suspected Drug Cultivation and Dealing

- South Wales Police are experts in enforcing the Criminal Law. They are not authorities in Tenancy Laws. As such, if you have tenants involved in illegal activity, while you should inform the police, do not make the common, but inaccurate assumption that you can 'Let the police sort it out'.
- Always agree with the police what you, and they will be doing.
- Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, the police will not be able to take action and will ask you to use your Tenancy Agreements to remove the persons from the property. Tenancy Laws are enforced by the parties in the relationship only.
- You will get the best results from the police by providing any information you can for their criminal investigation.
- In order to get the best co-operation, work one-on-one with the same police contact person.





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WARNING

If you have reason to believe there is an illicit lab on a property and you have been exposed directly, leave immediately, wash your face and hands.

Call 999, request the police and report what you observed.

If you have reason to believe your exposure has been extensive, contact your doctor. Some of the chemicals involved in creating these drugs are toxic, corrosive and carcinogenic.

This document has been produced in conjunction with Essex Police.