

Voices of the Unsanctioned Weed Market

With the support of the USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism, I developed and published a questionnaire for unlicensed cannabis market operators. Below are 15 completed responses from the 420 people who had seen the questionnaire as of publication deadline.

Yes, that number really happened.

These responses are intended to provide a window into the lives of the millions who make up America's so-called black market of weed. The document is not a survey, which elicits answers intended to be representative.

A few responses were tossed for being unserious. With some respondents it wasn't always clear that they were illegal *enough*, but if their insights resonated I gave them the benefit of the doubt and included their answers.

Each operator has been granted a pseudonym to protect them from prosecution.

Pseudonym: Danielle

How old are you?

35

How many years have you worked in weed?

15

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Black American.

State or states where you operate

California, Virginia, Maryland, D.C.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Dealer, broker.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

I'm legal now. I'm starting a craft grow. I have a caregiver's license, [but] we need folks to cut checks.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

Although I don't know personally, I've been tracking it closely. The legislation that's been most helpful has been in Michigan. Detroit is where it's at. You can call [their state] and ask about social equity and they'll straight up tell you they don't have a program.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

A lot of people who would make excellent candidates don't even have the fuckin' access. Also, operators who really want to do this won't give up their guns.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

Yes.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

My weed is grown with the intent that it will be tested. Organic, soil-driven product. Transparent.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how it has impacted your life.

I have not been arrested, but I have been charged. Right outside the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln, in Illinois. Eight grams. I hired an expensive-ass lawyer and they minimized the charge. Having a charge on my record as a schoolteacher, I waited two years to hire someone to expunge the record. Nobody's going to pay me back or my parents back for those fees.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

My husband is not a patient in the state of X, because he wants to keep his guns.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

I am trying to grow and cannot use a bank to finance that. There are two banks in the southern part of the state that will let me bank. After that, I'm fucked.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

There's always going to be a place for the person who has the unique product. You cannot scale out great product. And there's always going to undercut someone else's price. In the state where there's crazy taxes, then the black market's going to thrive.

Any last words?

At the core of any equitable initiative is education. There's a serious educational gap that's driving this market. There was a systematic attempt to keep people ignorant. Like *Reefer Madness*. There's an equity educational gap. I don't see enough forward education coming on.

Pseudonym: DankNodge

How old are you?

38

How many years have you worked in weed?

23 years in weed.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Producer, distribution, network.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

25 customers.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

Made \$1.2 million. Less than last year. Expect better next year.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Oversaturation of market.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

Within six years sold a business out of a garage to a publicly traded business that sold for \$1 billion.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

Both. Corporate has taken some to the dark side. The illegal market has expanded and continues to take [me] up with it.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run social equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Mileage. 100k miles on a lease within 3 years. Supplies, sales distribution throughout the state. Yes insurance, yes taxes.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

Yes and yes.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

Picking up a duffle bag of cash payment.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?
Carefully. We have MAPS banking too.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?
Legitimate ownership opportunities.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?
Sustained in the underbelly.

Pseudonym: Sandcrabber

How old are you?
49

How many years have you worked in weed?
Four years growing.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?
White.

State or states where you operate
Cali

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?
Professional by Day. Grower by night.

How many ongoing customers do you have?
3 customers.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?
Will make no money.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?
No interest in entering the industry. "Grow for friends and family."

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?
No.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run social equity effort?

No social equity aspirations.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Expenses: Dirt, seed & water.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

No harm, in sync with nature.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how it has impacted your life.

Never been arrested.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

Guns are common.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

A steel safe and working in a cash economy between family and friends.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

My operation can never be legal. Legitimate ownership opportunities.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Same as it looks today. Even licensed stores have to back-door about 30% to the black market.

Offset the cost of destroying your product due to expiration and fees.

Pseudonym: Chef Marky D

Age

36

States where you operate?

California, Oregon, Florida.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

I run a cannabis events food company.

How many customers do you have?

20

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

\$40,000

What are your barriers to entering the cannabis industry?

I don't believe we had many barriers outside of the fact that we can't do the type of cannabis consumption events at a normal bar or space that serves alcohol. We have to hide in a sense in the shadows, but honestly that's where we like to be. Under the radar and out the way.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

I think for us a success story is we work with people who want to have our type of events. Where guests are able to eat and smoke cannabis in a public space. When we did Coachella and were feeding the celebrities it was a success. Shit was lit.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

I can say in my circle the most talented people are now legit and run their own brands and concepts mostly legally.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

We do not pay taxes as of yet, but next year we are restructuring the business. We have many costs similar to a catering company. We do not buy weed as it is gifted to us by brands that want us to promote their brands.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

Knock on wood. But no, I honestly don't see weapons outside of my own often but the last event I did I saw handguns and AKs. We did a party with these crazy Afghan cats. Shit was wild. Normally our events are secured by whatever dispensary or venue we are working with or they are so under the radar [so] we don't need it. We literally exist in the shadows...

Pseudonym: Sanura

How old are you?

27

How many years have you worked in weed?

Less than a year.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Nigerian and Tanzanian.

States where you operate?

California.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

I do cannabis manufacturing where I take flower and turn it into distillate.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

Not sure.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

Not sure.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

The legalities around what is or isn't allowed when selling to customers.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

Recruiting at schools or just social media presence always helps.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

Yes.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

No.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how it has impacted your life.

No arrests.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

I haven't been around folx who use guns within my business.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

In order:

State support in becoming compliant.

Legitimate ownership opportunities.

High-end job training and employment.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Not sure.

Pseudonym: Pressa

How old are you?

35

How many years have you worked in weed?

Ten years.

State or states where you operate.

Missouri.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Black.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Growing, delivery.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

2 ongoing customers.

What's your expected gross?

I have an 18 plant limit.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Cultivation license difficulties, finding Black plant breeders. That people with felonies can't apply.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story?

Virgil Grant

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

No. We don't know where to look for these programs.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Water and power.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

Yes, I grow organics.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how it has impacted your life.

I got caught with weed in school when I was a kid. I didn't do time, but I had to do community service. I don't like to talk about it.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

My state is open carry. I just saw a gun 30 minutes ago.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

Motion lights and cameras. I've been trying to find a bank that will offer banking to a cannabis company.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry? (Choose as many as you like)

Legitimate ownership opportunities.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

I don't think there will be an unlicensed business in five years. It will be federally legal. Corporations see this is the next big-money thing. I'm sure we'll have our part in it.

Pseudonym: Gogy

How old are you?

61

How many years have you worked in weed?

30+ [years] in weed.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

White.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Farming, sourcing, delivery, brokering.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

Two dozen "associates."

What is your expected gross for this calendar year?

Unknown gross.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Failure of the state to protect small farmers and control competition created with the elimination of the five-year on-acre cap.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

No social equity success story “but maybe next week.”

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

Yes, the best are getting work.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

Yes to aspiration.

If you’ve been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how it has impacted your life.

My arrest set off an emotional, physical and financial crisis. My experience in jail was traumatic and I suffer PTSD from my interactions with the sheriff.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

Sometime last year.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

Carefully.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

That depends on the patient base. As long as the rest of the states don’t allow for their patients’ needs, people will continue to come to the Emerald Triangle. Prop. 64 did nothing to address the demand outside of California.

Any last words?

The corruption is rampant.

Pseudonym: Ty

How old are you?

55

How many years have you worked in weed?

35

State or states where you operate?

Colorado.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

White.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Chief scientist.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Legal barriers to former felons. The failure is keeping felons out of the legal industry.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Research and development.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

Yes.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how that has impacted your life.

Serious impact; loss of finances, technology, freedom.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

Five years ago.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

By working only with people I know well. Cash, no banks.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

Legitimate ownership. High end job training. State support in becoming compliant.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Depends on taxes.

Any last words?

I'm developing tech to make indoor growing more efficient, but old charges make me untouchable. This damages me, the industry, the country and the environment.

Pseudonym: Lele

How old are you?

51

How many years have you worked in weed?

Been around weed my whole life.

State or states where you operate

California.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

White European.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

I have trimmed, grown, harvested, made value-added products.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

0

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

Zero — I am on disability.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Sabotage from others in industry and cost.

Anecdotally, can you share a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

Failure — I am unable to apply as I do not want a permit.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

No.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally-run social equity effort?

Yes

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Robberies, crop loss.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

Yes.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how that has impacted your life.

In 2011 I was raided but not arrested because I was following 215 law. I had a male apprentice grower try to blackmail me. After I had paid his mortgage and all his power bills for a year and tried to extort 10 grand out of me. He called the police on my medical grow.

The local police saw my five patient scripts and they were with legitimate doctors and left their cards at the door. I went to the police station worried I was going to get arrested. Instead, they said it was the nicest indoor grow they had ever seen in the city of Arcata and asked why I would invest so much into growing when we now had dispensaries. I told them that as a patient I need to know the genetics of my medicine, what it was being grown with, and how it was grown to ensure the efficacy of the medicine. They said well you [can] get the first permit in the city of Arcata.

However, the apprentice then threatened to call CPS and my lawyer advised that I shut down. I had to shut down and moved to Lake County where I could find a landlord that was 215 friendly and willing to put that into a lease for my protection.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

2012 — I was the crew boss of 99 plant farms in a valley with many 99 plant farms. On one of the farms next to us a kid took some hallucinogens and flipped out. He had an Israel military background and was threatening people. All the crew bosses gathered to determine how to handle the situation. He came up behind me and put a gun to my head for leverage. I was the only woman. He wanted a car. They gave him the car and he left.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking, and accounting?

I kept everything hidden at home and burned any paper records.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

Legitimate ownership opportunities.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Like moonshine is now...still going.

Any final thoughts?

I wish we could see that "legacy" operators are just like our war POWS and should be afforded the same privileges around the cannabis industry. Like not having to pay taxes, low barriers to access, etc. We now have billions of dollars being made off of the plant that for generations had to live in fear to curate for the "industry" to be where it is now. They are our POWs. Many are still being imprisoned by policies.

Pseudonym: Frodo

How old are you?

36

How many years have you worked in weed?

Nine.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

White.

State or states where you operate.

California.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Involved in every aspect of cultivation from sprouting seeds to trimming and packaging.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

10 customers.

What's your expected gross?

I typically try to recover what I spent on nutrients, soil, etc... Usually around \$1500. I also trade product for labor.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

I prefer to grow for personal use and only sell enough to cover what I spent over the year. Legal industry has a lot of hoops to jump through and is a surprisingly competitive market. If you have less than desirable product you can still offload it on the black market for a lower price.

Anecdotally, can you tell me a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

I'm a small-time grower so not sure this applies to me. But my biggest failure was when my weed looked like hay, smelled like hay, so I didn't make any money or smoke it.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

I'm not sure what you're asking, but the big time growers I know make a ton more money on the black market, so they're comfortable with the risk.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

I guess just my time. Legal farms pay taxes and a license fee.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

Probably not. Big time growers spend a lot of money that I don't have.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how that has impacted your life.

I received a possession ticket in 2007 and I was broke so it was hard to pay the fine. I eventually did to avoid penalties.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

Never.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

I'm too small for that to matter.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run social equity effort?

No social equity aspirations.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

Legitimate business ownership opportunities, state support in becoming compliant.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

I'm guessing it will be the same as it is today but maybe more people dipping their toe into the water.

Any last words?

None. Thanks.

Pseudonym: Trevor

How old are you?

30s.

How many years have you worked in weed?

Weed adjacent, seven years.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

70% Black, 30% white.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Research and entertainment.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

20,000.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

\$170-210k

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

There's no need for me to join yet.

Anecdotally, can you share a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

There have been no direct social equity success stories involving my business that I'm aware of. I sold more shirts in 2020 when people were supporting black businesses for like a week. A social equity failure is when I went to an investor meeting and after the presentation the investor told me he doesn't give much investment out to "colored people."

Are the most talented of the overpoliced operators you know involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

Legal weed can attract top talent by increasing pay. It's more lucrative to operate illegally/gray area in a solo business than it is to grow/mature with a legal business.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run social equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Insurance during live events or experiments. L.A. rental space for brick and mortar biz face.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how that has impacted your life.

Never been arrested.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

In the U.K., my friend bought MDMA from someone. My friend told everyone that someone was selling weak MDMA, a guy found us [and] pulled a gun. Gun looked so old and Russian.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

CRYPTO!

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

My operation can never be legal.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Exactly what it looks like now.

Pseudonym: S. Scott

How old are you?

32

How many years have you worked in weed?

Three years.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Black.

State or states where you operate?

Massachusetts.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Policy, equity, program creation/development/management.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

Continued criminalization of those most previously disproportionately impacted.

Anecdotally, can you share a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

A number of Ana's Equity Program are now open and legally operating.

In five years what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

The same as it does now. The true market.

Pseudonym: Nick

How old are you?

36.

How many years have you worked in weed?

Four.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

White.

State or states where you operate?

Oregon.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Extraction and product development.

How many customers do you have?

10.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

New business. Really undetermined.

Anecdotally, can you share a social equity success story? Can you describe a social equity failure?

I've worked for exclusively BIPOC owned businesses in the cannabis space. The second company consistently brought in Black entrepreneurs to introduce aspects of the business and possibilities for partnership.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved with social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

The large financial barriers for entry in many of the aspects of cannabis leave it difficult for anyone outside of the 1% to make a big impact on the space. As numbers go, that typically means white businessmen control most of the market. Licensing is costly and complicated. I believe the industry does draw talented youth into a new market, but old systems and ways of looking at cannabis remain. Branding, marketing, product development and true potential are being halted by archaic laws.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run social equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Because of the lack of federal agreement on cannabis, banking is still limited. We're just now seeing less cash and more digital transactions. It adds costs and dangers to this industry.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

There are all kinds of work around for testing, but Oregon has high standards and maybe overtests products. The tracking can be exhausting and can still be thwarted.

If you've been arrested on a cannabis charge, explain how that has impacted your life.

I haven't, but my brother received a misdemeanor for \$20 worth of weed that a cop lied and said a friend told him he had it. It impacted his job options and still to this day is bothered by it.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business?

Working on a new product with a former member of the armed forces. He told me to check out the jars he had for stability issues. He [had] a desert camo painted AF just laying on the floor of the room with the jars and never acknowledged it.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

I own my own LLC and have an account for that. It's registered to a different business address. Everyone on my team is a gun enthusiast except for me.

What must happen to bridge the gap between your business and the legal cannabis industry?

Legitimate ownership opportunities.
High-end job training and employment.
State support in becoming compliant.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

Hectic. The hemp rise and crash has completed. The rise of delta-8 in nonlegal states and more powerful products in the legal ones.

Any final thoughts?

State by state challenges. What are the issues facing Nevada vs. Washington? What are some common grounds? What's working and what isn't?

Pseudonym: O

How old are you?

90 years old.*

How many years have you worked in weed?

Six years in the field.

State or states where you operate.

California, Oklahoma and New York.

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Asian Pacific Islander.

Can you briefly describe the work you perform?

Broker.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

15 customers.

Was this year's gross higher than last year?

Bigger.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

None.

Are the most talented of the historically overpoliced operators you know now involved in social equity programs? If not, how can legal weed attract top talent?

THC Design.

Do you aspire to take part in either a commercial or governmentally run equity effort?

Yes.

Name your expenses that are likely invisible to consumers.

Gas.

Growers only: If your product had to meet testing standards, would you make a profit?

No.

Describe the most recent time you saw a gun while doing business.

Last year.

As a cash industry participant, how do you handle security, banking and accounting?

Backyard.

In five years, what will the unlicensed weed business look like?

It will be federal by then so [it] will become licensed.

Pseudonym: Big J

How old are you?

52

How many years have you worked in weed?

10

What's your racial background or ethnicity?

Black.

State or states where you operate?

Wisconsin.

Can you briefly describe the kind of work you perform?

Seller.

How many ongoing customers do you have?

15.

What's your expected gross for this calendar year?

\$20,000.

Do you expect to do better next year? Was this year's gross higher than last year?

Yes because more people are using.

What are your barriers to entering the legal cannabis industry?

I have a drug record.

*I understand that "O" is likely not 90 years old. Their responses are credible and, in my opinion, merited inclusion.