

Pot stores open in Canada ahead of legalization

December 15 2016

Eight storefronts selling recreational marijuana opened in Montreal Thursday, flouting the law in a push to grab market share ahead of promised legalization in Canada that is still at least a year away.

And two more are planned for later this month in the nation's second biggest metropolis, despite a vow by Mayor Denis Coderre to use "all of the city's administrative tools to stop the illegal activity."

The new franchise stores supplied by activist Marc Emery, Canada's self-proclaimed "Prince of Pot," come after grand openings of stores in Vancouver, Toronto and a dozen other Canadian cities.

With other chains and independent operators also setting up dispensaries, it is estimated there are now at least 200 operating in what has been termed a "gray area" of the law that has seen some prosecutors hesitant to lay charges for a criminal act that will soon be legal.

Several licenced medical [marijuana](#) producers, meanwhile, have been laying the groundwork to add recreational sales, for example, partnering with established brands such as rapper Snoop Dogg's "Leafs by Snoop."

They currently sell prescribed dried marijuana only by mail order, under rules established by Health Canada.

'Prince of Pot'

The Cannabis Culture dispensary chain is Emery's latest commercial venture. Others have included selling pot seeds, which landed him in a US prison for five years.

The 58-year-old publisher of Cannabis Culture magazine has spent two decades advocating for the legalization of cannabis.

Canada's current ban on the possession and sale of recreational marijuana—which won't be lifted until at least 2018 as the government must still draft and pass legislation—is "absurd," Emery said at the launch of the Montreal stores.

"It's unjust. Lock me up if you will," he said.

The Cannabis Culture locations in Montreal, which will bring to 22 the number of its stores across Canada, will be open to adults over 19 years of age.

"We are proud to be demonstrating what legalization should look like, serving the Canadian consumers who have suffered persecution for so many decades," Marc's wife and business partner Jodie Emery said.

Several Cannabis Culture stores and competitors across Canada have been raided and shut down by police over the past year, only to defiantly reopen days later.

Others have faced fines for simple bylaw breaches, notably in Vancouver where lax enforcement has led to the proliferation of an estimated 90 dispensaries—more than the combined number of Starbucks and McDonald's restaurants in the city.

In Toronto, police arrested 90 sellers and laid 186 drug trafficking charges in raids of 43 dispensaries over the summer. The first cases to go

to court in December failed to stick, however, leading one defense lawyer, Selwyn Pieters, to lash out at the raids as a "colossal waste" of resources.

Busted in US

Marc Emery has campaigned for pot legalization as an activist, an entrepreneur who pioneered bong and other pot paraphernalia sales, and founder of the Marijuana Party of Canada.

His budding empire, however, came crashing down in 2010 when he pleaded guilty to a US charge of narcotics trafficking and was extradited to the United States, for selling marijuana seeds by mail order.

After serving his sentence, he returned to Canada and started over.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau last year campaigned on a platform that included legalizing recreational use of marijuana.

An expert panel this week provided him with a blueprint for legalizing the weed.

It contained 80 recommendations, including maintaining a separate medical marijuana regime, as well as criminal penalties for trafficking and selling cannabis to youth.

The 106-page report also outlined regulations for creating a legal market for cannabis including plain packaging and labelling, restrictions on advertising, and retail distribution.

In settling on a minimum age of 18, the experts discounted warnings by health groups about the potential impact of marijuana on developing brains under the age of 25.

Trudeau told reporters Thursday legislation would come by June next year.

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