For nearly a year, teenagers have been robbing Portland dispensaries. Then somebody shot a budtender.

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Michael Arthur worried he might die on the job.

For almost two years, the 44-year-old father worked as a clerk at Cured Green, a cannabis dispensary tucked in an alleyway behind a small grocery store and teriyaki shop along North Lombard Street.

Arthur’s girlfriend, Chiara Ryder, says he grew increasingly fearful of a robbery. Around November, Ryder says, Arthur told her he had seen four young men scoping out the shop late at night.

He ended the conversation with a warning: If I wind up dead, these are the guys who did it.

“It raised the hairs on the back of Michael’s neck. It made him afraid for his life,” Ryder says. “It wasn’t his words. It was the look on his face.”

On Dec. 14, Arthur was shot to death in a robbery at Cured Green that scored a few jars of weed and a tip jar containing less than $20.

His death horrified the cannabis industry. It shouldn’t have been a surprise.

People who’ve watched Portland’s weed crime spree say the fatal shooting was only a matter of time.

By the time Arthur was killed, Portland cannabis shops had already been robbed, burglarized or looted 95 times in 10 months, according to data from the Oregon Liquor Control Commission.

That number is now up to 103, with three armed robberies so far in 2021.

By contrast, Portland liquor stores, a classic target for crime, reported just 22 burglaries and no robberies over the same time period.

In one year, Portland-area cannabis shops reported more than half a million dollars stolen—$583,000 in cash and products, gone.

Since the pandemic descended in March, weed stores in Portland have been plundered at a rate of about two per week. It’s the largest crime spree targeting one kind of business in Portland memory, and carries echoes of drugstore robberies in the 1980s.

“We specifically said, ‘Somebody’s gonna get killed,’” says Mike Getlin, who owns a cannabis farm and founded the Oregon Industry Progress Association, a lobbying group. “I think it’s going to happen again.”

During a three-day period in late May and early June, 20 shops reported getting hit. In August, one shop had its ATM lugged away. In December, a weed delivery truck driver was robbed at gunpoint. One shop owner was cleaning up broken glass from a break-in earlier that night when a second gang wandered by—and burglarized his shop.

At least four budtenders have reported being zip-tied during robberies.

“I’ve heard of employers saying their employees are requesting that the shops don’t open,” says Jesse Bontecou, co-director of the Oregon Retailers of Cannabis Association. “If someone comes in and puts a gun into your face, it is a terrifying thing.”

Chains are hit just as often as mom-and-pop shops.

When WW called the Mr. Nice Guy dispensary in East Portland, one of four in the metro area, and asked if it was the location that had been burglarized, an employee replied drolly.

“You could be calling all of our locations,” the employee said, “and you’d be calling the right one.”

Court records suggest it’s mostly the work of teenagers. At least seven of the suspects the Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office has charged so far were juveniles. Five more were teenagers ages 18 to 19, and most were still in high school at the time of the crimes.

It’s unclear whether the wave of cannabis shop robberies is a nationwide issue, or unique to Portland. WW was unable to locate comprehensive data or reporting on such incidents in other cities.

The spate of robberies is occurring amid a pandemic that has squeezed low-income Oregonians, sent alienated students home from school, and has crime soaring across the city.

It’s compounded by turmoil at the Portland Police Bureau, a former criminal defense lawyer who organized Oregon’s cannabis legalization efforts. “The notion that these businesses have to operate with a lot of cash definitely make them a target for robberies.”

IN MEMORIAM: Jina Yoo, owner of Cured Green, holds up artwork of her employee and longtime friend, Michael Arthur, who died during an armed robbery at the store on Dec. 14.
Oregonians used a lot of weed during the pandemic. Cannabis sales boomed: More than $100 million worth of product was sold in January 2021 alone, compared to $68.7 million the previous January.

Sales have been increasing steadily since Oregon voters legalized recreational use in 2014. Since 2016, the cannabis industry has paid more than $400 million in taxes to the state, including over $133 million in fiscal year 2020.

But federally, pot remains a Schedule I narcotic—illegal. That means dispensaries can’t open bank accounts, because the banks would risk federal prosecution for holding the money from a criminal enterprise.

That prohibits cannabis shops from getting bank loans, filing for bankruptcy, storing money in a bank account, and accepting credit and debit card transactions.

“The lack of cannabis banking has created a public safety crisis. And that public safety crisis can be addressed very easily and very quickly at the federal level,” says Beau Whitney, a Portland economist and business consultant for the cannabis industry.

In Oregon, a handful of credit unions will work with cannabis retailers, enabling dispensaries to deposit their proceeds, write checks and pay business expenses electronically.

But those credit unions, say dispensary owners, charge tens of thousands of dollars a year in fees. And even then, it’s hard to get an account. The wait time for Maps Credit Union, the Salem-based credit union most ubiquitous among cannabis retailers in Oregon, is as long as 75 days, according to a dispensary owner who’s on the waitlist.

Bret Born, who owns the Ascend dispensary on Northeast Sandy Boulevard, has been a member of the Wauna Credit Union since late 2019. It charges him a 1% fee on all cash deposits, plus $250 a month.

Before the credit union, Born says he paid for everything—rent to his landlord, utility bills to Portland General Electric, taxes to the state—in cash. Sometimes he’d lug the dollar bills to a 7-Eleven, where he could exchange them for a money order.

Born still deals with a lot of cash. Because of the credit union’s deposit fee, Born says, he tries to put as little as possible in the account. That means he still pays for some expenses, including his lawyers’ fees, in $20 bills.

Even if a retailer has been approved by one of the cannabis-friendly credit unions, all in-store transactions are cash only. That’s because most customers have credit or debit cards affiliated with national services like Visa or Mastercard—which are subject to federal banking regulations.

A credit union account didn’t keep Ascend from getting robbed.

After 8 pm on Feb. 23, three hooded and masked men entered the store. One stood guard by the door as the other two forced employees at gunpoint to lie down on the floor. They swiped all the cash from the till—$469—and cleaned all the shelves of cannabis with an estimated retail value of $15,000. (One jar of flower can sell for up to $1,500 on a street corner, and more across the Idaho border.)

Even though he lost significantly more weed than cash, Born believes the inability to do traditional banking remains the core problem.

“This is not a race issue,” Born says. “This is not a cannabis issue. This is a cash issue.”

Some cannabis retailers have resorted to depositing cash from sales into personal bank accounts.

That’s a gamble: Frequently depositing high-dollar amounts can result in a “suspicious activity” flag. If a bank learns where the money is coming from, it can shut down an account entirely. (Two store owners who spoke to WW said they tried this strategy in the past and got caught.)

That’s why John Monteleone III, owner of the Fidus cannabis shop in the Southwest Portland neighborhood of Multnomah Village, keeps his money stored in two black, refrigerator-sized safes in the backroom of his dispensary.

“We figured it was the safest place,” Monteleone says. “Nobody knew the codes but us.”

But that didn’t stop him from losing more than a quarter of a million dollars in cash and products in a matter of minutes—perhaps the largest robbery involving legal weed in state history.
It was nearing 4 pm on Aug. 21 when the co-founder and manager at Fidus stood alone in the spacious showroom where soft music from speakers echoed off the polished concrete floors and high ceilings.

Fidus doesn’t appear an obvious target for crime. It’s a converted suburban home, complete with a garage. It sits on Capitol Highway, the main drag of Multnomah Village, a sleepy Southwest Hills neighborhood that looks trapped in an episode of *WandaVision*.

At 4:17 on the hot Friday afternoon, two men walked into the store. At the counter, one of them pretended to reach for his ID—and instead sucker-punched the manager. Surveillance footage shows one of the men then pulled a gun on the manager, forced him to strip off his shirt, shoes and socks, and pistol-whipped him. The manager lay on the floor, writhing, as one man stood over him, pointing a gun at him.

The second man walked up a short flight of stairs to the back of the shop where the safes were located; just one was open. It contained dozens of sealed bags full of weed, and the man deposited armfuls of it—with an approximate wholesale value of $130,000—into large clear plastic bags, making multiple trips out the back door, where a third man waited in a shiny black sedan, sans license plates.

The heist was going smoothly, except for one hiccup: The robbers couldn’t get the second safe open. So the men dragged the manager, bleeding and thrashing, up the flight of stairs into the backroom, threatening to kill him if he didn’t tell them the code.

One of the robbers finally got the second safe open. Jackpot.

It contained $125,000 in cash, $25,000 of which Monteleone was planning to pay to the state in a few weeks’ time when his taxes were due. The men zip-tied the manager’s wrists and ankles, leaving him facedown on the floor. The trio left the dispensary through the back door and peeled out of the parking lot.

The ordeal lasted 18 minutes.

After it was clear the men had left, the employee managed to stand up and hop to a nearby wall, pushing a panic button by collapsing onto it. He then hobbled outside and screamed for help. An ambulance showed up first; the police about 20 minutes later.

Monteleone acknowledges it wasn’t ideal to have $125,000 in cash on hand. He had tried before to deposit cash periodically in a personal account. But after running about $20,000 through the account in one month, he says, the bank caught on and shut it down.

“It’s really scary,” Monteleone says. “You’re a sitting duck.”

He’s given up hope police will help.

“They don’t care. They don’t show up,” he says. “There’s no policing going on. And you think the gangs aren’t smart enough to notice that? It essentially allowed the criminal underworld to take over.”

Police arrests have led to 21 suspects being charged for cannabis burglaries and robberies—and 12 of the suspects were teenagers (see “High Crimes,” page 14). But Getlin, the cannabis lobbyist, says the Police Bureau has treated dispensary robberies with indifference.

“There’s such disarray in the Portland Police Bureau right now,” he says, “they don’t seem to have the capacity to handle it.”

PPB Detective Rachel Baer says cannabis shop crimes are assigned to the Police Bureau’s robbery and burglary units, which consist of a combined nine detectives.

In the summertime, Baer says, there were six detectives in her unit, and all of them were reassigned to cover protests beginning in late May. For several months, she says, those detectives “were not actively investigating any robberies.” They returned to their normal assignments around Thanksgiving.

“The Portland Police Bureau and the robbery unit are not apathetic to dispensary robberies,” Baer tells *WW*. “These robberies and the victims receive the same amount of time, care and work as any other victim of a robbery. The robbery unit has always assigned and worked cases based off of the crime committed and the available evidence, not based off of the type of business that has been victimized.”

Mayor Ted Wheeler tells *WW* he takes the cannabis crime wave seriously.

“What started out as smash-and-grab incidents have escalated to armed robberies and at least one death of a cannabis shop employee,” Wheeler says. “Robberies are terrifying for the victims. Robberies cost lives, money and
“MICHAEL WAS AN AMAZING, AMAZING PERSON. HE TREATED PEOPLE WITH ACCEPTANCE AND HE TREATED PEOPLE WITH KINDNESS. HE REALLY WAS THE BEST EXAMPLE OF A FATHER THAT I’VE EVER SEEN.”
—RYDER
All of those factors are the reason many retailers in Portland, despite booming sales during the pandemic, can’t afford the fees for credit unions, to install additional security, or even to pay wages for more than one employee to work at a time.

“Money is like water: It comes and goes. But human life is nothing you can replace.”

Blumenauer has been pushing for federal legalization of cannabis for decades. But he reached a milestone in October, when the House passed his legalization. The bill died in the then-Republican-controlled Senate. But now, with Democrats in charge, he feels hopeful.

“I think the table is set,” Blumenauer says. “I think it’ll happen relatively early in this session of Congress.”

Each cannabis retailer who spoke to WW for this story agreed that passage of the SAFE Banking Act would make the industry as a whole much safer.

“You give us credit cards and the SAFE Banking Act, and our industry would soar,” Monteleone says.

Yoo, the owner of Cured Green, agrees banking rights would help. But it would provide little comfort after Arthur’s death.

“Who can replace the father of a son?” she asks.

“Money is like water: It comes and goes. But human life is nothing you can replace.”

HIGH CRIMES

Court records show most of the defendants charged with raiding weed shops are teenagers.

It was nearing sunrise on Sept. 23, 2020, as Shawndell Leandre Deshazo drove a white Chevy Camaro along Northeast Sandy Boulevard.

Deshazo and his crew, according to prosecutors’ charging documents, had hit four cannabis stores, all closed for the night, in less than three hours.

At each location, at least one suspect waited in the Camaro as two to three others entered the store, sometimes by breaking a window. Deshazo stole more than $1,000 worth of product, prosecutors allege.

When police pulled Deshazo, 28, over at nearly 5 am, three of his alleged accomplices were still in the car with him. All were juveniles.

That’s not uncommon. WW reviewed Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office files on all cases of cannabis shop burglaries and robberies dating back to March 2020. Twelve of the 21 suspects charged so far have been teenagers.

“A lot of the people involved, I’m told, in these cannabis raids are not under 21 but, in many cases, under 18,” says Norm Frink, a former Multnomah County chief deputy district attorney.

Elisha and Dov Hirschfield, 18-year-old twins, are the only defendants the DA’s office has convicted in the only rifts are not only under 21 but, in many cases, under 18. Two of them were aged 17 and another 19. Two are students at Madison High School, and four of the five are immigrants from countries in Africa: Rwanda, Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The crime spree shows little sign of flagging. So far in 2021, the Oregon Liquor Control Commission says, four cannabis shops have been hit in the Portland region—three of them robberies—including one Jan. 7 at the Lemonnade dispensary on the farthest edge of Southwest Portland that resulted in a shootout.

As for Shawndell Deshazo, the most prolific cannabis burglar prosecutors charged in 2020, he’ll never stand trial. On Feb. 25, he fell victim to another part of Portland’s crime wave. He was shot to death outside an apartment complex in the Rose City Park neighborhood.

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