

Pitt County is State's 11th Worst for Drug Trafficking

By Kelly Burgess

April 2008

Greenville police continue to struggle with drug trafficking, stopping only an estimated 5 percent of illegal drugs brought into the city. With an estimated 85 percent of all illegal drugs successfully trafficked into the United States each year, North Carolina, according to the Drug Enforcement Agency, continues to see significant increases in drug trafficking activity.

According to the State Data Center and data from the Administrative Office of North Carolina Courts, as of 2007, Pitt County ranked 11th of the 100 counties in North Carolina for the percent of drug trafficking cases based on population. Pitt County had 2.3 charges for every 100 residents, yet that was significantly lower than No. 1 Beaufort County, which had 43 charges per 100 residents. Mitchell and Onslow Counties filled the second and third spots with 34 charges for every 100 residents.

Getting caught with 28 grams or more of cocaine or 10 pounds or more of marijuana is considered trafficking.

From 2005 through 2007, Pitt County had an average of 384 drug trafficking charges each year, with 1,154 total charges during the period. Lt. Anthony White, head of the Greenville Police Department's Special Investigations Unit and the Drug Task Force, blames Pitt County's high drug trafficking activity on the lack of officers. When a new chief of police, William Anderson, was instated on May 1, 2007, he asked White how many officers were needed to successfully run the Special Investigations Unit. White said he needed 26, but could survive with 16. Yet the unit was given just four new officers, two in 2008 and two in 2009 in addition to the nine officers currently in the Special Investigations Unit.

Greenville officials said the city could not afford to meet White's request. Providing each officer with a car, training, and equipment during the first year costs \$100,000. Following the initial year, it costs \$77,000 per year to keep an officer, which includes salary, insurance and training, White explained.

According to Sgt. Vance Head of the Pitt County Sheriff's Office, Pitt County has such a high number of drug trafficking charges because it is a major supply area for surrounding counties. Head said North Carolina is also a staging and transporting point to northern states including Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York. Drugs are being brought in on local highways, including Highway 11, Highway 13, and State Route 264. Drugs are also being smuggled through the local airport, bus stations and package delivery companies.

Catching drugs at package delivery companies is almost an everyday occurrence, said White. Drug dogs are taken to local shipping stores in the mornings, where they locate packages with drugs. After finding about three packages, the dogs need to rest, and by the time they are ready to search again, the rest of the unchecked packages have been shipped out. White explained that even though the packages are caught and the drugs are seized, investigators rarely catch the sender or receiver because of the wrong addresses on the packages. Drug traffickers use wrong addresses to allow the recipient's residence to stay anonymous. Online tracking of packages

allows the recipient of the package to know where it is, and in most cases he or she will pick it up from the package delivery companies' location, said White.

Marijuana, the No. 1 illegally abused drug in the United States, is one of the most prevalent drugs in North Carolina. Locally, The Drug Rehab Center of Greenville's Web site explains that marijuana is not going to go away any time soon, as it is becoming more available and easy to access. Traffickers have been bringing in larger loads via campers, pickup trucks and larger vehicles.

According to data from the Administrative Office of North Carolina Courts, charges for trafficking or conspiring to traffic cocaine, marijuana, opium, heroin, methaqualone, as well as charges for conspiring to sell or deliver cocaine, marijuana, opium and heroin have steadily increased in North Carolina over the past few years. In 2007, trafficking charges totaled 10,104 in North Carolina.

Having the ability to put an end to drug-trafficking will continue to be a challenge for North Carolina and its cities. Cheryl Gentile, who teaches an Alcohol and Drug Abuse course at East Carolina University, says it has been proven that North Carolina grows more marijuana than soybeans. White says all seized marijuana is taken and burned at an undisclosed place in Pitt County.

Greenville has assembled a countywide task force to provide support for each municipality, allowing officers in different jurisdictions to work together to catch drug traffickers. Greenville pays for the task force's equipment and building, which is located in Pitt County. Agencies involved in the task force include three officers from the State Bureau of Investigation, one from the Pitt County Sheriff's Office, one from the Farmville Police Department, and one from Lenoir County Sheriff's Office. By working together, they hope to minimize the growth of drugs into Greenville.

The task force makes use of EPIC, also known as the El Paso Information Center. This Texas center is the drug intelligence gathering center for the government, and White uses EPIC all the time to learn what is coming across the borders, what is being stopped, and what the police should look for. Two years ago when cocaine prices were going up and there was little on the streets, EPIC officials could explain why. They learned that Mexico had started requiring people crossing the border to stop at three new checkpoints on the way to the United States. With the three additional stops, Mexico's border patrol was able to seize much of the cocaine that had so easily crossed the border in previous years. That made it less available locally.

The national Drug Intelligence Center is another group that works with police to help lower drug trafficking. The national Drug Intelligence Center studies drug trafficking organizations, which are complex organizations with highly defined command-and-control structures that produce, transport, and/or distribute large quantities of one or more illicit drugs. The national Drug Intelligence Center gathers information regarding these drug trafficking organizations and sends it to law enforcement agencies.

While working with national intelligence centers is important in understanding and remaining aware of drug trafficking trends, Chief of Police William Anderson thinks staying intimately involved in the city is also an essential part of keeping illegal drugs out of Greenville. Anderson

has implemented a community involvement plan that he hopes will help keep more children drug-free in the future. Police have sponsored dances, block parties, and field trips to encourage community involvement. Many of these programs are located on the west side of Greenville, where more children grow up with their parents on drugs. The point of this program is to show the children that they have a chance in life and that people do care, White said. The plan has been under scrutiny, however, by the public as well as by some officers. One officer who asked not to be named, said the program has little impact because it is so spread out and children do not have transportation to get to functions if they are on the other side of town.

Greg Crouse contributed to the reporting of this story.

