

2017

Analysis of Traffic Stops Involving Drug Seizures

Robert Messbarger

University of Nebraska at Kearney

Follow this and additional works at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal>



Part of the [Criminology and Criminal Justice Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Messbarger, Robert (2017) "Analysis of Traffic Stops Involving Drug Seizures," *Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 21 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://openspaces.unk.edu/undergraduate-research-journal/vol21/iss1/12>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity at OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Journal by an authorized editor of OpenSPACES@UNK: Scholarship, Preservation, and Creative Endeavors. For more information, please contact weissell@unk.edu.

Analysis of Traffic Stops Involving Drug Seizures

Robert Messbarger

ABSTRACT

This paper is a content analysis of traffic stop drug seizures throughout the Midwest from January 1, 2015 to September 30, 2016. Information is gathered from news articles regarding interstate or major highway drug seizures. The results examine various characteristics of the traffic stop and the suspect involved. The average traffic stop drug seizure happens on Thursday afternoon. The suspect is usually male, aged 20-29, and in most cases is charged with intent to distribute. The suspect is typically in a newer SUV and is in possession of marijuana. It is likely the suspect is a resident of the state of California, as that is an area experiencing heavy drug trafficking. This paper focuses on the widespread use of marijuana and the impact of varying legality throughout the United States on drug trafficking.

ANALYSIS OF TRAFFIC STOPS INVOLVING DRUG SEIZURES

There has been a continual increase of the number of people using illicit drugs over the past decade (National Institute, 2015). Drug use across the country serves as the catalyst for drug trafficking. United States federal sentencing guidelines define drug trafficking as “the manufacture, import, export, distribution, or dispensing of a controlled substances” (United States Sentencing Commission, 2015). Drug trafficking across state lines is an especially relevant topic, as some drugs, such as marijuana, are legal for recreational use in some states, medical use in others, and are completely outlawed in the rest. This paper examines various traffic stops made throughout the Midwest, occurring on interstates or major highways, that have resulted in the seizure of drugs, money, and paraphernalia related to drug use. It looks at traffic stops of recreational users and at stops made of individuals who are clearly trafficking illegal drugs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (2015), the United States has experienced an increase in illicit drug use. In 2013, 9.4 percent of the American population aged 12 or older had used an illicit drug within the past month, compared to 8.3 percent in 2002. Since the use of most drugs has remained stable or decreased, the current trend is attributed to the steady rise of marijuana users since 2007 (National Institute, 2015). The National Institute on Drug Abuse states that although “drug use is highest among people in their late teens and twenties,” there has been an increase of drug use among people in their fifties and early sixties (2015).

Looking at overall illicit drug use in the United States, marijuana is the most popular drug of choice with approximately 19.8 million current users as of 2013, subsequently making it the most widely available drug. These contribute to the overall decline in negative perception toward marijuana (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). According to the United States Department of Justice (2015), “In 2014, only 36.1 percent of high school seniors viewed regular marijuana use

as harmful; this was a 3.4 percent decline from 2013 and an 18.5 percent decline from 2004” (p. 70).

An important factor affecting marijuana use in the United States is its legalization in select states. In the three years following the legalization of marijuana for medical purposes in Colorado, “The yearly average number interdiction seizures¹ of Colorado marijuana increased 357 percent from 53 to 242 per year” (“Legalization,” 2016, p. 109). Likewise, in the two years succeeding legalization of marijuana for recreational purposes in Colorado, interdiction seizures increased 37%. The average amount seized during these stops increased 30%. Out of 394 seizures conducted by Colorado highway patrol in 2015, it was determined that the marijuana, the majority of which originated from Denver, was destined for 36 different states. Missouri, Illinois, Texas, Iowa, and Florida were the top five destinations. Nebraska ranked as one of the leading destination states as well, right behind Iowa and Florida (“Legalization,” 2016). As a result of the increased frequency of drug trafficking and drug seizures due to the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, Nebraska and Oklahoma filed a claim with the United States Supreme Court (*Nebraska and Oklahoma v. Colorado*, 2014). Ultimately denied, the complaint stated it is the responsibility of the federal government to regulate all interstate and foreign commerce and that the illegal trafficking of drugs, specifically marijuana, from state to state is the jurisdiction and duty of the United States Government (*Nebraska and Oklahoma v. Colorado*, 2014). In addition, the *Nebraska and Oklahoma v. Colorado* (2014) complaint included details addressing the illegality of the legalization of marijuana, since it is under the Controlled Substance Act, a federal law, which schedules marijuana as a Schedule I drug. A Schedule I drug is completely outlawed by federal law and is defined by the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (n.d.) as having “no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse.”

According to the United States Department of Justice (2015), even though “marijuana is cultivated in all 50 states, the majority of domestically-produced marijuana (that which is produced outside of state-authorized cultivation) comes from California” (p. 72). With regard to foreign produced marijuana, the United States Department of Justice (2015) identifies Mexico as the primary source of supply. Traffickers use tunnels and maritime vessels in the southwest region of the country and bring large quantities primarily into the states of California, Arizona, and Texas.

METHODS

Various online news articles were retrieved through use of Google search engine. Initially, only articles based in Nebraska from January 1, 2016 to September 30, 2016 were collected. Articles selected had to feature a drug seizure relating to an interstate or major highway. The first five pages of Google results were taken into account for each specific search. Any article absent a publication date was eliminated; any article referencing the same incident as a previous article was eliminated; and any article from a site that required registration or

¹ “Legalization” (2016) defines a Colorado marijuana interdiction seizure as “incidents where state highway patrols stopped a driver for a traffic violation and subsequently found Colorado marijuana destined for other parts of the country” (p. 109).

payment for access was eliminated. The first Google search was “I-80 drug bust,” and ten articles were retrieved. The following search was “Nebraska drug bust 2016 I-80,” which yielded two more articles. Next searched was “I-80 traffic stop,” resulting in four more articles. These three searches resulted in only 16 usable articles. Since there were not enough articles, the search was expanded to include traffic stops from 2015 and any Midwest state. States focused on include Nebraska, Illinois, Ohio, and Wyoming. “I-80 drug bust” was searched again, this time including any article from the first seven pages of results. Eighteen articles met the requirements. “I-80 traffic stop” was searched again and through the first seven pages, three articles qualified for analysis. The additional searches resulted in a total of 37 articles.

A coding sheet created using an excel document involved different aspects of the traffic stop and drug seizure (see Appendix A for the coding sheet used). The coding sheet allowed for documentation of the characteristics to be evaluated. A content analysis identified the characteristics listed on the coding sheet for each article. For results, the ensuing characteristics were analyzed: the day of the week, the time of the stop, the agency involved, the drug involved, the amount of the drug, reason for being stopped, the type of car, reason for detection of the drug, the sex of the suspect, the age of the suspect, where the suspect is from, and the charges the suspect received.

RESULTS

Results are presented as basic descriptive statistics. All 37 articles reported the day of the week the traffic stop was made. As seen in *Figure 1*, traffic stop drug seizures occurred most commonly on Thursday, with 10 stops. Friday, the next highest, included seven stops, Saturday had five stops, and Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday returned four stops each. The lowest number of seizures occurred on Wednesday with three.

The time of day the traffic stop occurred was another factor analyzed. Twenty-three cases referenced the time of the stop with afternoon (12:00 p.m. – 5:59 p.m.), the most common, having nine stops (Figure 2). The evening (6:00 p.m. – 11:59 p.m.) followed with six stops, the morning hours (6:00 a.m. – 11:59 a.m.) with five, and three seizures occurred during the nighttime hours of 12:00 a.m. – 5:59 a.m.

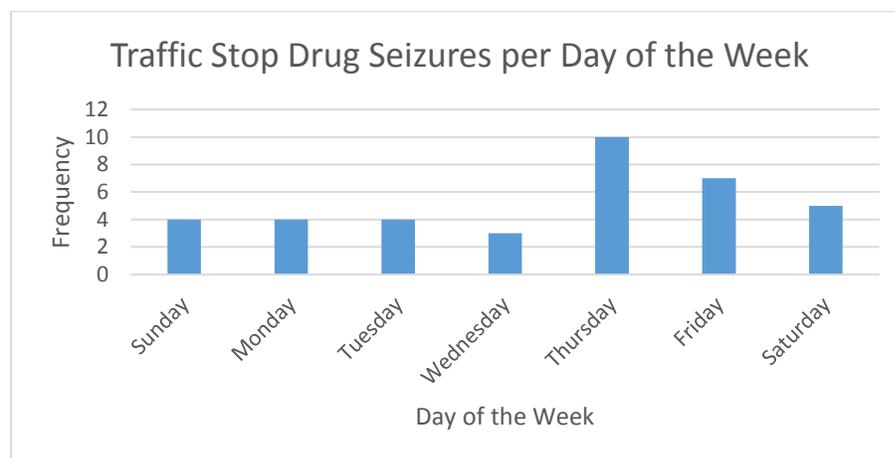


Figure 1. Frequency that a traffic stop drug seizure occurred throughout the week

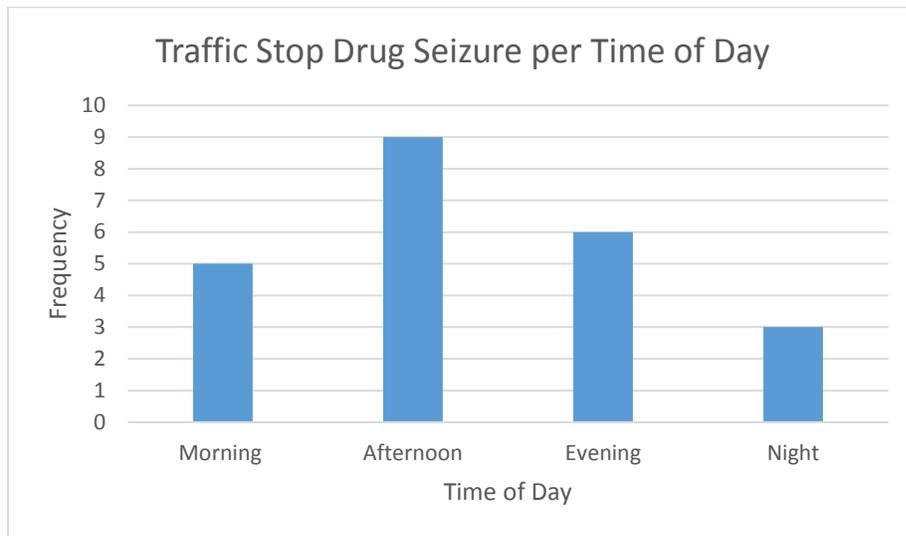


Figure 2. Frequency that a traffic stop drug seizure occurred throughout the day

All 37 articles reported an agency making the traffic stop. Highway or State Patrol made 17 of the stops, as did sheriff’s departments, with city and municipal law enforcement agencies conducting only three of the stops.

In terms of the drug involved, all articles reported at least one drug. Seven articles reported multiple drugs found. Figure 3 shows the most common drug found was marijuana, accounting for 29 of the 37 stops. Four of the stops involved cocaine, the second most frequent drug. Heroin, methamphetamine, and hashish oil were each involved in three cases. Hydrocodone, OxyContin, Xanax, psilocybin, ecstasy, LSD, and THC were all involved in one case each.

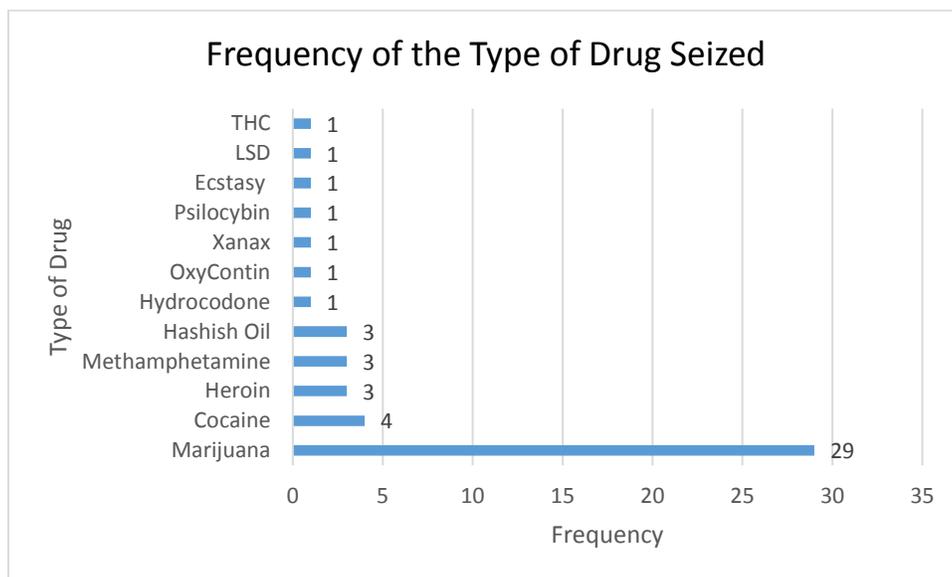


Figure 3. Content analysis of the frequency of the type of drug seized

Similarly, the amount of drug seized during the stop was analyzed. Some articles did not report any amount of drug found. Seven articles reported an amount for more than one drug. Forty-two amounts of drugs were given. For marijuana, 3.14 pounds was the least amount seized and 1,517 pounds was the greatest amount. Methamphetamine amounts ranged from 5 ounces to 7.9 pounds and cocaine ranged from 56.9 grams to 22.7 pounds. The smallest amount of heroin seized was 22.3 grams and the largest 23.6 pounds. There was anywhere from 48 grams to 3 pounds of hashish oil seized.

Another variable analyzed was the reason the suspect's vehicle was stopped. A specific reason for being stopped was reported in 26 of the cases. Of those 26, 24 were stopped for moving traffic violations and 7 of those were specifically identified as speeding. One reason was a license plate violation and the other remaining reason was an indicator of criminal activity.

The ensuing variable analyzed was the type of vehicle. There were 20 cases that reported a description of the suspect's vehicle. Of those 20 cases, 10 of them reported the year of the vehicle. Seven of the 10 reported a vehicle less than two years old (2014 or newer). The most prevalent type of vehicle being used was an SUV, involved in 7 of the 20 articles reporting the type of vehicle. Two RV's and one semi-truck were mentioned, and the rest were trucks, cars, or vans.

A key factor examined was the reason for detection of the drug within the vehicle. Twenty-nine out of 37 cases involved the reason for detection. Some cases cited multiple reasons. The most prevalent reason a drug was detected, cited in 17 stops, was due to the use of a police dog (K-9 unit). Sixteen of the stops reported suspicious activity as the reason for detection. Relating to this, four cases reported the drug was in plain view or the suspect gave consent to law enforcement to search the vehicle. Odor was cited as being the cause for detection in six cases.

The sex of the suspect was also evaluated. Not all cases mentioned the sex of the suspect, and some cases mentioned multiple suspects' sex. The sex was mentioned for 53 suspects. Males were dominant, making up 43 of the suspects. Females comprised 10.

Similarly, the age of the suspect was examined. Not all cases mentioned the age of the suspect and some cases mentioned multiple suspect's ages. There were 46 suspects' ages mentioned and none under age 19. The age group of 20-29 year olds comprised the biggest population with 21 of the suspects. There were 11 suspects aged 30-39. Age groups of 40-49 and 50-59 each had four suspects. There were six suspects that were 60 and older. The youngest recorded suspect was 21 years old. The oldest recorded suspect was 78 years old.

Another variable subsequently assessed was where the suspect originates. Not all cases mentioned where the suspect was from and some cases mentioned multiple suspects' residence. There were 53 suspects' residences mentioned. One suspect was from Ottawa, Canada, the remainder from the United States. Only two states produced five or more suspects, the majority of suspects (13) from California or Illinois with 6.

The final variable analyzed was the charges against the suspect. Forty-four suspects were listed as having charges brought against them. Not all cases mentioned the charges brought

against the suspect. Some cases listed multiple charges for one suspect. The most common charge, other than those directly relating to possession of a controlled substance, was intent to distribute. Intent to distribute a controlled substance or a variation of this charge were leveled against 38 suspects. The only other notable charge that was brought against suspects was failure to affix a tax stamp or a tax stamp violation. This charge was brought against 14 suspects.

DISCUSSION

The data collected from the 37 articles provided an enlightening description of what a drug stop most commonly looks like in the Midwest. Since all of these articles were from stops made on the interstate or a major highway and the majority of the suspects' reported charges were intent to distribute, it is reasonable to assume qualities of this typical drug arrest can be applied to form a picture of a typical drug trafficker.

Findings resulted in several unexpected outcomes. Some people may think the stereotypical drug stop is on a weekend in the early morning hours involving an old car. In reality, the average drug stop occurs on a Thursday afternoon and involves a new SUV style vehicle. Also assumed is the absence of suspects 60 years of age and older. However, the findings support the statement from the National Institute on Drug Abuse regarding an increase of drug use among people in their fifties and early sixties (2015). Another factor overlooked is the lack of common sense among the suspects. For example, over 90% of cases reporting a reason for stopping the vehicle was due to a moving traffic violation, an offense that could easily be avoided. One might assume an individual with drugs would be doing everything in their power to avoid attention from law enforcement. Apparently, this is not the case. Related, four of the suspects either had the drug in plain view or granted consent to law enforcement to search their vehicle. Again, it is presumed if somebody knows they have drugs in the vehicle, they would not keep them in the open for somebody to see or willfully grant permission for law enforcement to search.

It is important to note a clear majority of the cases involved marijuana. A direct correlation is seen between this and marijuana ranked as the most popular drug among Americans (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2015), the rate of marijuana users is on the rise and fewer people are seeing marijuana as a dangerous drug or a threat. Accompanying this is the varying legality of marijuana from state to state. As a result of the legalization of marijuana in Colorado, the number of interdiction seizures for marijuana skyrocketed ("Legalization", 2016). According to "Legalization" (2016), four out of the top five states of destination for marijuana are located in the Midwest. Clearly, the number of marijuana drug seizures on the interstate currently is far greater than in the past. Law enforcement throughout the region and the country should be aware of this growing trend so they can combat it effectively. Similarly, California is a high traffic area for both domestic and foreign produced marijuana (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). This is reflected in the data, as there is more than double the number of suspects from California compared to anywhere else. This is clearly one of the most pressing issues law enforcement is having to deal with regarding

drug use and interstate drug trafficking. One of the most valuable tools law enforcement has at their disposal is the use of K-9 units, which makes a huge impact on identifying traffickers.

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of possible limitations of the study. First, the residence of the suspect data may be skewed due to multiple suspects in a case originating from the same location. The location of the suspect may also be inaccurate due to only analyzing articles from Midwest stops. Not all characteristics analyzed were found in each article examined, leading to potential errors in the data. There were a few articles that only reported the bare minimum. The findings of this research cannot be assumed to portray the typical interstate drug seizure nationwide, as the articles only focused on stops occurring in the Midwest.

CONCLUSION

This research serves as a pilot study and gives a rough depiction of a typical drug trafficker in the Midwest. The findings illustrate just how widespread use of marijuana is throughout the region. As more states legalize marijuana, further steps need to be taken by federal law enforcement to better regulate interstate transport of the drug. Further research should analyze and compare the Midwest to other regions of the country, such as coastal states. Furthermore, additional research should be done to better understand the financial and legal impact of medical and recreational marijuana on surrounding states.

REFERENCES

- Campbell man arrested in I-80 drug bust. (2015, January 8). *WKBN*. Retrieved from <http://wkbn.com/2015/01/08/campbell-man-arrested-in-i-80-drug-bust/>
- Cole, K. (2016, January 20). Bust in Lincoln intercepts 1,500 pounds of pot worth an estimated \$7.5 million. *Omaha World Herald*. Retrieved from http://www.omaha.com/news/crime/bust-in-lincoln-intercepts-pounds-of-pot-worth-an-estimated/article_3907727c-bed0-11e5-b9b2-87a383243f55.html
- Douglas County Deputies Recover 87 Pounds of Marijuana in I-80 Drug Busts. (2015, January 30). *WOWT News*. Retrieved from <http://www.wowt.com/home/headlines/Douglas-County-Deputies-Recover-87-Pounds-of-Marijuana-in-I-80-Drug-Busts-290360781.html>
- Downing, J. (2015, December 31). Wyoming Highway Patrol makes drug bust on I80. *KGWN*. Retrieved from <http://www.kgwn.tv/home/headlines/Wyoming-Highway-Patrol-makes-drug-bust-on-I80-363958091.html>
- Drug bust on I-80. (2016, August 29). *ABC 8 Eyewitness News*. Retrieved from <http://www.klkntv.com/story/32813714/drug-bust-on-i-80>
- Drug bust on I-80 following speeding stop. (2015, March 25). *Bridge Valle Pioneer*. Retrieved from http://www.bridgervalleypioneer.com/v2_news_articles.php?heading=0&page=77&story_id=3617
- Hanson, R. (2016, February 16). Additional details released on I-80 drug bust in Cass County. *KJAN Radio Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.kjan.com/index.php/2016/02/additional-details-released-on-i-80-drug-bust-in-cass-county/>
- Hastert, A. (2016, May 31). Two men arrested on drug charges following traffic stop on I-80 westbound. *965KSOM*. Retrieved from <http://965ksom.com/two-men-arrested-on-drug-charges-following-traffic-stop-on-i-80-westbound/>
- I-80 drug busts yields 1 pound of meth, 22 pounds marijuana, authorities say. (2016, August 24). *KETV Omaha*. Retrieved from <http://www.ketv.com/article/i-80-drug-busts-yields-1-pound-of-meth-22-pounds-of-marijuana-authorities-say/7662208>
- James, K. (2016, April 28). 211 pounds of pot found in Douglas County traffic stop. *Nebraska Radio Network*. Retrieved from <http://nebraskaradionetwork.com/2016/04/28/211-pounds-of-pot-found-in-douglas-county-traffic-stop/>
- Johnson, R. (2016, September 23). Deputies seize 470 pounds of marijuana in I-80 traffic stop. *Lincoln Journal Star*. Retrieved from http://journalstar.com/news/local/911/deputies-seize-pounds-of-marijuana-in-i--traffic-stop/article_f5161a3c-3b2e-59ec-a110-29e59d3b1b82.html
- Legalization of Marijuana in Colorado: The Impact. (2016). *Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area*, 4, 109-125. Retrieved from <http://www.rmhidta.org/html/2016%20FINAL%20Legalization%20of%20Marijuana%20in%20Colorado%20The%20Impact.pdf>
- Lesyna, T. (2016, September 23). One arrested for I-80 drug bust. *KMTV*. Retrieved from <http://www.kmtv.com/news/local-news/one-arrested-for-i-80-drug-bust>

- LSO finds 2.2 pounds of cocaine during traffic stop on Interstate 80. (2016, August 29). *1011Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.1011now.com/content/news/LSO-finds-22-pounds-of-cocaine-during-traffic-stop-on-Interstate-80-391622451.html>
- Mallory, M. (2016, February 4). Illinois, Morris police find 117 pounds of marijuana in drug bust. *Morris Herald-News*. Retrieved from <http://m.morrisherad-news.com/2016/02/02/illinois-morris-police-find-117-pounds-of-marijuana-in-drug-bust/am50915/>
- Martin, Brent. (2015, June 8). Troopers make 2 drug busts on I-80, including seizure of 24 lbs. of heroin. *Nebraska Radio Network*. Retrieved from <http://nebraskaradionetwork.com/2015/06/08/trooper-make-2-drug-busts-on-i-80-including-seizure-of-24-lbs-of-heroin/>
- Martin, B. (2016, July 18). Trooper seizes nearly 200 lbs. of marijuana in I-80 traffic stop. *Nebraska Radio Network*. Retrieved from <http://nebraskaradionetwork.com/2016/07/18/trooper-seizes-nearly-200-lbs-of-marijuana-in-i-80-traffic-stop/>
- Massey, M. (2016, September 17). Police uncover pot, cocaine in I-80 drug bust. *1011Now*. Retrieved from <http://www.1011now.com/content/news/Drug-bust-on-I-80-393825421.html>
- Miller, S. (2016, June 24). NSP traffic stop nets large drug bust near Beaver Crossing. *NBC Nebraska*. Retrieved from <http://www.nbcneb.com/scottsbuff/content/news/NSP-traffic-stop-nets-large-drug-bust-near-Beaver-Crossing-384287641.html>
- National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2015, June). *Drug Facts – Nationwide Trends*. Retrieved from <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/nationwide-trends>
- Nebraska and Oklahoma v. Colorado. (2014). Retrieved from <https://www.ok.gov/oag/documents/NE%20%20OK%20v%20%20CO%20-%20Original%20Action.pdf>
- Ozaki, A. (2016, February 20). \$2.4 million in suspected drug money seized during traffic stop on I-80. *KETV Omaha*. Retrieved from <http://www.ketv.com/article/2-4-million-in-suspected-drug-money-seized-during-traffic-stop-on-i-80/7658267>
- Paul, J. (2016, January 25). Nebraska sheriff: Western Colorado man caught with 515 pounds of pot. *The Denver Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.denverpost.com/2016/01/25/nebraska-sheriff-western-colorado-man-caught-with-515-pounds-of-pot/>
- Smith, S. (n.d.). Woman Busted For Driving With 100 Pounds of Marijuana. *Fox42*. Retrieved from <http://fox42kptm.com/news/local/woman-busted-for-driving-with-100-pounds-of-marijuana>
- Sturgeon, M. (2016, January 26). Troopers find 47 pounds of marijuana during I-80 traffic stop. *KMTV*. Retrieved from <http://www.kmtv.com/news/local-news/troopers-find-47-pounds-of-marijuana-during-i-80-traffic-stop>
- Sullivan, D. (2015, November 6). Drug bust on Interstate 80 in Council Bluffs nets 140 grams of

- meth. *The Daily Nonpareil*. Retrieved from http://www.nonpareilonline.com/news/local/drug-bust-on-interstate-in-council-bluffs-nets-grams-of/article_8ba9bd20-84ae-11e5-8de9-2f190814197f.html
- Three area men arrested in drug bust in Minooka. (2016, September 28). *Q Hit Music*. Retrieved from <http://www.qhitmusic.com/2016/09/28/three-area-men-arrested-in-drug-bust-in-minooka/>
- Traffic stop leads to \$80,000 drug bust on I-80. (2016, September 14). *Seward County Independent*. Retrieved from http://www.sewardindependent.com/milford/article_633b9e24-7a82-11e6-a4af-07dfcf3d00dc.html
- Traffic Stop Leads to Seizure of 130 Pounds of Marijuana on I-80. (n.d.) *KFBC Radio*. Retrieved from <http://www.kfbcradio.com/6391-2/>
- Troopers seize marijuana in I-80 traffic stop. (2016, April 12). *KMTV*. Retrieved from <http://www.kmtv.com/news/local-news/troopers-seize-marijuana-in-i-80-traffic-stop>
- U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Agency. (2015, October). *2015 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary* (Report No. DEA-DCT-DIR-008-16). Retrieved from <https://www.dea.gov/docs/2015%20NDTA%20Report.pdf>
- United States Drug Enforcement Administration. (n.d.) Drug Scheduling. Retrieved from <https://www.dea.gov/druginfo/ds.shtml>
- United States Sentencing Commission. (2015). § 2L1.2(b)(1). Retrieved from <http://www.ussc.gov/guidelines/2015-guidelines-manual/2015-chapter-2-1-x>
- Whitten, Jeff. (2016, April 19). I-80 drug bust near Annawan, Ill. *KWQC*. Retrieved from <http://kwqc.com/2016/04/19/i-80-drug-bust-near-annawan-ill/>
- Zoellick, S. (2016, July 22). Wyo. highway patrol seizes 313 pounds of marijuana. *Wyoming Tribune Eagle*. Retrieved from http://www.wyomingnews.com/news/wyo-highway-patrol-seizes-pounds-of-marijuana/article_cdb1d600-4fd1-11e6-a92a-07a209f5b467.html

APPENDIX A

Coding Sheet Used to Analyze Characteristics of each Drug Seizure

Article #	Date of Stop/Bust	Day of the Week	Location (County/State)	Agency Involved	Drug Involved	Amount of Drug	Reason for being stopped	Reason for detection of drug
Article 1								
Article 2								
Article 3								
Article 4								
Article 5								

Type of Car	Time of Stop	Specific Location of Drug/Money in Vehicle	Amount of cash involved?	Sex of Suspect(s)	Age of Suspect(s)	Where the suspect(s) is from	Charges