



## Debate | Should drugs be legalised?

**YES**

*Harry Wise*

*Third Year Politics*

Forgive me for starting with a cliché, but the American War on Drugs is the very definition of insanity. That is, repeating the same action over and over and over again while expecting a different outcome.

Since President Nixon declared drug abuse “public enemy number one”, millions of Americans have had their lives ruined by this expensive, illogical, racist, and often corrupt war on drugs. Millions more from Mexico to Manchester have suffered from drug laws that criminalise innocent people and the effects of criminalisation. Yet, by supporting the prohibition of drugs, most politicians believe that waging war on drugs works.

The reality is that the criminalisation of drugs increases crime itself. Because illegal drugs are so expensive, many dependent users resort to other crimes to fund their habit. According to the Home Office, around a third of all property crime is drug-related while around three quarters of crack cocaine and heroin users admit committing crimes to feed their habit. Drug cartels and gangs are furthermore synonymous with crime and violence. Indeed, hundreds of thousands of murders around the world are drug related.

Ultimately, criminalisation benefits drug cartels. High demand and low supply caused by criminalisation drives up the price of drugs allowing gangs to rake in billions every year. The UN estimates that the worldwide illegal drug market is worth \$330 billion a year, more than the economy of Denmark. Trillions have been spent trying to combat the illegal drug market, but it’s the drug cartels and gangs who keep on winning.

In practice, drug laws are racist. Studies show that in America and the UK minorities bear the brunt of drug prohibition. A 2010 study by the American Civil Liberties Union found that, even

though black and white Americans used marijuana at the same rate, African Americans are four times as likely to be arrested for its possession. Furthermore, three quarters of all those imprisoned for drug offences are black. In Britain, even though drug use is higher among the white community, Release, a drug related charity, found that black Britons were six times more likely to be searched on suspicion of drug possession in London. Furthermore, in 2009/10 the Metropolitan Police charged 78 per cent of minorities who were caught with cocaine compared with 44 per cent of whites.

Drug laws are also a bad health policy; under prohibition addiction is more likely and HIV/AIDS is more common. In a 2009 report by the Cato Institute in Portugal saw HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis rates among drug users fall by 17 per cent within five years of decriminalising drugs. Legalisation would enable regulations regarding the quality, strength and purity of drugs which would save lives.

Too many people, too much money and too much time has been spent on this war on drugs. It is not working. Legalisation would make the world a healthier, richer and more peaceful place.

**NO**

*Carrie Smith*

*First Year Sociology*

The war on drugs has been long debated but inconclusive. With the UK ranking highly in European statistics on drug use, the current approach isn't entirely fit for purpose. However, this isn't to say legalisation is the perfect solution.

Reducing the illegal activity statistics doesn't remove the harmful effects of drug abuse and addiction. Moreover, when the suggested approach for smoking related health issues involves increasing restrictions, it seems bizarre that the solution to drug use would be wide spread acceptance, resignation and thus legalisation.

Arguments for legalisation on the basis of tax benefits critically ignore the health-related issues in favour of a capitalist pursuit of tax profit. Whilst the tourism trade in Amsterdam undoubtedly benefits from the legalisation of marijuana, to legalise drugs seems to ignore addiction and health issues whilst disregarding the subsequent financial cost of such issues.

Rather than encouraging legalised supply, society should completely discourage the use of drugs altogether. It may be that marijuana is as medically harmless as alcohol or tobacco, yet, if we legalise the recreational use of drugs in society, would it not be hypocritical to tell a heroin addict to stop taking drugs? In this respect, every drug could be a gateway towards a stronger, harder and more addictive substance. For the safety of our society, there needs to a conclusive and definite line to indicate what substances are harmful and illegal, and what remains acceptable and controlled.

Similarly, prison sentences for users or addicts only perpetuate criminal activity; a harm reducing approach towards the possession and use of drugs seems to offer a more constructive alternative. In Portugal the possession and use of drugs is no longer a criminal offence. Those caught with drugs are targeted with therapy and community service rather than imprisonment or fines. Drug use should not be legal, but this does not mean that the current approach of criminal punishment is a good thing.

Reducing harm should be the main focus of any drug policy. We should accept that drugs can never be eradicated from a society and will always pose a problem. However, full legal prevalence is not the answer. Rather we should target the tragedies caused by the abuse of drugs. For example, under Portugal's new approach, street deaths from overdoses fell in hundreds and drugs related HIV cases fell by 1,000 in six years due to the distribution of clean needles.

You can argue it is safer and fairer to legalise drugs, but it begs the question safer and fairer for whom? I do not suggest that maintaining the current illegal status of drugs whilst providing treatment would work in every case, but allowing drugs to have a validated and legal place in our society is a form of legalised encouragement and will only make things worse.