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War on drugs not working: New Voices

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On May 12, 1996, Miami police raided the home of Richard Brown on a false tip that the 73-year-old retiree with no criminal record was selling drugs. After busting the door open, police claim that Richards began firing a gun, prompting officers to pump 123 rounds into his body.

However, a later investigation revealed that the gun police allege Brown had used had no traces of his fingerprints on them. Brown's 14-year-old great-granddaughter, Janeka, reported he was not holding a gun when he instructed her to take shelter in a bathroom moments before he was killed.

Sadly, Brown is just one of countless victims of the war on drugs, a federal policy push that has squandered billions of dollars overcrowding America's prisons, militarizing state and local police, and making no measurable impact reducing drug abuse. It's time for Americans to stand up against this failed policy as taxpayers and, more important, human beings.

Since 2001, the Department of Homeland Security alone has spent \$34 billion in federal grants for state and local police departments to purchase paramilitarylike equipment, including tanks and assault rifles. While the circumstances surrounding Brown's raid may seem unique, mistakes are commonly made in SWAT operations. By the Cato Institute's count, there have been 14 raids on innocent suspects in Florida over the past three decades, three of which have ended in death.

This problem is particularly pronounced in Florida because of the state's harsh mandatory-minimum sentencing requirements. Under state law, individuals can be convicted for prescription-drug trafficking by simply possessing more than four grams (seven pills) of opiate-based painkillers. As a result of these draconian punishment laws, Florida prisons are notoriously overcrowded, with more than 100,000 inmates in state custody at a cost of more than \$2 billion per year.

Many residents convicted of these harsh state laws are not violent offenders; they just got caught up in unfortunate circumstances. One such example is Scott Earle, a Florida man who occasionally used Vicodin to treat the residual pain from numerous car accidents throughout his life.

A few months after being prescribed the drug in September 1995 for a diverticulitis attack, Scott was introduced to a woman at a local bar who began romantically pursuing him. As their relationship began to blossom, the woman began asking him for Vicodin to treat her back pain. Three months after meeting her, Scott was arrested for felony drug trafficking and conspiracy. She was an undercover cop.

Sadly, such ridiculous sentencing is not a problem exclusive to Florida, but one that persists on the federal level as well. About half of the close to 200,000 inmates in U.S. custody are serving time for drug offenses; many of them were locked up for crimes as simple as marijuana possession. In fact, cannabis is responsible for the largest chunk of drug convictions at 27.6 percent more than harder narcotics like methamphetamine, according to the U.S. Sentencing Commission.

In total, there are more than 2.2 million Americans in state, local or federal custody. The U.S. has spent roughly \$1 trillion on drug prohibition since 1971. But despite these massive costs in dollars and human lives, marijuana and prescription-drug abuse has risen, defeating the very purpose for which the war on drugs was launched.

As taxpayers and human beings, it's high time to stand up against the war on drugs' incredible waste and demand more humane approaches like treatment and decriminalization. Especially in Florida, lawmakers can follow the lead of other states like Texas and Louisiana that have successfully enacted drug-sentencing reform.

Any war that has left society more tattered than when it was first waged is no war worth fighting.