



3 Ways the War on Drugs Is Failing and 1 Way to Fix It

By Dan Ritter

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The United States war on drugs arguably began in June 1971 when President Richard Nixon declared drug abuse “public enemy number one.” His declaration followed the the submission of a special message to Congress on “[Drug Abuse Prevention and Control](#),” in which he laid the framework for America’s strategy in the war on drugs.

The strategy was predicated on one basic observation: the drug [trade](#) is a massive, international shadow [economy](#). At the time, and even now, it’s hard to tell how big it actually is, but it was as clear then as it is clear now that it dwarfs even the considerable resources that the U.S. has brought to bear against it. In 1971, Nixon asked Congress for \$371 million (\$2.1 billion, adjusted for inflation) “for [programs](#) to control drug abuse in America.”

The figure today is hard to quantify because of the vast array of federal, state, and local programs, and because externality costs are hard to calculate, most estimates range from huge to enormous. A study conducted by the Cato Institute estimated that the U.S. could save \$41 billion per year in enforcement costs if it legalized drugs, while the [Drug Policy Alliance](#) estimates that the U.S. now spends more than \$51 billion annually to fight the war on drugs. This figure is dwarfed by the \$1.3 trillion machine that the United Nations estimates is the global illegal drug economy.

Nixon described a strategy of attacking the illegal drug economy from both the supply and the demand side, but the results of that strategy have been poor. Today, the illegal drug trade is alive and well. Here’s some evidence.

1. Use

In 2011, the self-appointed Global Commission on Drug Policy — a think tank comprised of high-ranking politicians and influential thinkers from around the world as members — pointedly declared that “[the global war on drugs has failed](#).” The group made a multifaceted case for their claim anchored by compelling data, but the argument can be broadly boiled down to this point: instead declining, drug consumption has increased. There is perhaps no more damning evidence that a war is failing than the fact that the enemy is growing stronger, not weaker.

The group cited data from the UN, which looked at drug during the decade ended 2008. During those 10 years, the use of cocaine increased 27 percent, the use of opiates increased 34.5 percent, and the use of cannabis increased 8.5 percent.

It's hard to tell whether or not increased drug use is actually a result of the war or not, but either way it is clear that the war is not having the intended consequence. [Here's the full report from the Global Commission on Drug Policy.](#)

2. Potency and price

“During the past two decades, the supply of major illegal drugs has increased, as measured through a general decline in the prices and a general increase in the purity of illegal drugs in a variety of settings,” reads a 2013 report published by BMJ Open, an open-access journal published by the British Medical Journal.

The term “general” here may be a bit misleading because it may downplay just how dramatically prices and purity have changed over time. Between 1990 and 2007, the price of heroin in the U.S. fell by at least 80 percent, according to the report, while average purity increased by 60 percent.

3. Capture

At a glance, the data regarding the capture of illegal drugs by law enforcement is encouraging. The same study that showed that prices are falling and purity is increasing also showed that seizures of cannabis by U.S. law enforcement increased by a tremendous 465 percent between 1990 and 2010 and that seizures of heroin increased by 29 percent. Raining on the parade are cocaine seizures, which decreased by 49 percent over the same period.

But the bigger picture is that the overall capture rate is bad. In [a recent Congressional testimony](#), General John Kelly, Commander of the U.S. Southern Command, reported that enforcement officers seize just about 20 percent of the drugs leaving Columbia, one of the countries most heavily targeted and monitored. Moreover, U.S. Southern Command has a goal of capturing just 40 percent of the drugs coming in from Latin America. So even in a best case scenario, drug enforcement would not be able to reduce drug flow to a meaningfully low rate.

So, what can policymakers do about the failing war on drugs? The advice being shouted from advocacy groups and think tanks around the world is that they should end it, plain and simple. President Nixon's strategy to simultaneously attack the drug economy's supply and demand has failed, and that failure has been an expensive lesson. The drug war has cost hundreds of billions of [dollars](#), helped make America the country with the highest incarceration rate in the world, and has so hardened cartels that they have become paramilitary forces unto themselves.

The solution championed by groups like the Global Commission on Drug Policy is that the issue of drug use and abuse should be treated as if it was a [healthcare](#) issue, not a criminal issue. The United Kingdom, Switzerland, and the Netherlands have all successfully instituted policies using

this philosophy. Rates of abuse generally declined when addicts were embraced by the healthcare system instead of stigmatized.