



President Trump and other leaders must work together to reduce drug deaths

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President Trump's declaration Thursday that the opioid crisis is a "national emergency" was an important step, but doesn't go far enough. Abuse of multiple drugs across our country is a health and crime emergency that has created an intolerable death toll of staggering proportions.

America needs leadership from the president and elected officials of both parties – at every level of government – to protect our people from needless drug deaths, in the same way they work together to protect us from terrorism and natural disasters.

As the New York Times reported in June, "drug overdose deaths in 2016 most likely exceeded 59,000, the largest annual jump ever recorded in the United States," according to preliminary data compiled by the newspaper. That's a 19 percent increase over the 52,404 drug overdose deaths in 2015, which included about 15,000 deaths involving prescription opioids.

By contrast, a Cato Institute study found that terrorists have killed far fewer Americans. Terrorists murdered 3,432 people in the United States between 1975 and the end of 2015 – including all the people killed in the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The drug overdose problem is bigger in our country than anywhere in the world. As Vox reported in June: "America has about 4 percent of the world's population – but about 27 percent of the world's drug overdose deaths," according to a recent United Nations report.

We must wake up to the need to protect the American people from the deaths caused by the scourge of opiates and other drugs that are abused. Ignoring the need for urgent action amounts to willful ignorance, or worse – callous disregard for truth.

Sadly, drug overdoses are the leading cause of death among Americans under 50. Kids get the brunt of that horror, and stunned parents are traumatized for life when they must bury their children. And the preliminary numbers for drug overdose deaths are higher so far in 2017 – meaning the problem is getting worse, not better.

The drug epidemic is crashing across our country like a tsunami of epic proportions, claiming tens of thousands of lives – not all at once, but day by day, often individual by individual. So it gets far less attention than a terrorist attack or natural disaster that claims many lives at once.

Shockingly, statistics on the terrible death toll caused by the drug epidemic do not include runaway drug-related violence – spiking homicide and violent crime rates in drug-infested cities like Chicago and Baltimore. So-called sanctuary cities – where illegal immigrants are left alone by police unless they commit another crime besides unlawful entry into our country – are hit particularly hard.

Just look at coroner data, overflowing mortuaries, hospital emergency room admissions for drug overdoses, drugged drivers killing themselves and others on the road, and rampant gang violence. These tell a nightmarish story that all 50 governors know all too well.

Nor do the numbers of drug overdose deaths capture hidden costs. Drug overdoses and addiction – from prescription pills to heroin, to methamphetamines and cocaine, to Mexican and Colorado marijuana – exact a terrible human toll. Every family member is affected.

National indifference and lack of leadership now mean that 80 percent of domestic abuse is related to substance abuse. Add to this the 50 percent uptick in drugged driving reported in states providing easy access to marijuana because they pretend it's harmless.

In the ultimate cognitive dissonance, some of these states think it is sound public policy to make money by addicting kids to marijuana and then more potent drugs. They increase spending on drug abuse prevention, treatment and law enforcement – but they must know there is no way on Earth they can spend enough to prevent and treat the addictions they are creating.

Rocketing medical treatment costs and other costs associated with drugs from marijuana to opiates always outstrip short-term gains from taxes on legalized drugs. Treatment is expensive, time-consuming and too often ineffective. And it puts incalculable strain on families and budgets.

Pretending there is a way to regulate the black market for addictive substances is absurd and delusional. Basic economics shows that highly addictive substances create inelastic demand. People will pay whatever they must for something they cannot do without. The more users, the more addiction, the more the cost. Anyone who tells you differently is pedaling bunk for political gain.

In the field of addiction, science does not lie. America can no longer continue to ignore the costs and heartbreak tied to leaders promoting addiction and maligning law enforcement.

For more than a decade, we have swept rising drug deaths and addiction under the rug, stigmatizing afflicted families, blithely talking down prevention and talking up legalization. Enough falsehoods. If legalizing crime reduced its prevalence, we would legalize it all. It doesn't.

Members of Congress and governors know these facts, but they don't want to talk about them. President Obama knew them, but laughed openly at drug abuse. This attitude rejects the voices

of experts and ignores the cries of pain from the nearly 100,000 parents who lost their children to drug overdoses last year. Fortunately, President Trump has heard them.

Yes, drug abuse deaths are a national emergency. But the emergency goes beyond opioids. Our society is at risk operationally, culturally, socially, legally, morally and as a matter of long-term public safety.

The giant wave of drug abuse is slowly engulfing our nation. International drug trafficking organizations from Mexico, Colombia, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, China and the Middle East are here, peddling their deadly merchandise and killing Americans. We cannot pretend otherwise.

So let's be clear – overdose deaths from drugs constitute a “national emergency” that represents a failure of leadership at every level of our society. Americans must sit up and take notice. We have no concerted national strategy, no national drug czar, no reauthorized Office of National Drug Control Policy, no confirmed head of the federal Drug Enforcement Administration. Yet we face a “clear and present” danger.

Overflowing morgues and heartbroken families are more than a political inconvenience. We are in the grips of a vicious cycle. President Trump's declaration of a national emergency and Attorney General Jeff Sessions' commitment to reverse this crisis are uplifting. But this will take national attention, time, determination and funding for many years to come.

What we confront is not a one-drug worry. A palpable threat faces America, with potential to inflict enduring cultural, public safety and national security damage. To confront this threat, we must act thoughtfully, rapidly and as one nation. The drug crisis is about more than opiates.