



## The U.S. should decriminalize drugs

Armin Haracic

April 13, 2017

When President Richard Nixon started the “War on Drugs,” **it was communicated** as a means to combat the increase of heroin addiction and marijuana use. Yet a 2016 **Harper’s Magazine interview** with former Nixon domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman shows a different perspective. Ehrlichman stated that the Nixon White House had two prime enemies: the anti-war left and African-American people.

“We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black,” Ehrlichman stated. “But getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin. And then criminalizing both heavily we could disrupt those communities. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.”

The War on Drugs isn’t just a policy failure — it’s a cultural embarrassment. According to **The New York Times**, there’s been a consistent stream of drugs, human-trafficking and associated gun violence in the U.S. since the War on Drugs started. In Mexico, following President Felipe Calderon’s 2006 declaration of “war against drug trafficking,” the homicide rate doubled. There’s been an increase of drug cartel territorial control and there’s been an overflow of prisons with 41 percent of drug criminals jailed for possessing substances worth less than 500 pesos (\$30). The U.S. needs to begin the process of decriminalizing drug usage and move towards dealing with the socioeconomic factors that inform usage in the first place.

Columbia Professor Carl L. Hart **states that** while certain recreational drugs can alter the functions of particular brain neurons, there’s “virtually no data in humans indicating that addiction is a disease of the brain.” According to Hart, instead of annually arresting millions for drug possession, which does little to solve the source of drug use, governments need to better understand “the role of socioeconomic factors in maintaining drug use.” Cannabis possession in particular accounts **for half of** the U.S.’ yearly 1.5 million drug arrests, with African-Americans four times more likely to be arrested than Caucasians, despite both using cannabis at the same rates.

Federal and state government's need to do a better job of looking into the psychosocial factors that account for drug use and addiction. These include racial discrimination, employment status, policing and neighborhood characteristics. Particular elements within these factors, from joblessness to communal poverty, frequently impel one to take up drug usage as a means to curb his or her distress. It's important to note that addiction's **based on the release** of dopamine and how it alters the brain's role in learning and memory. Drug addiction's linked with the speed and intensity of a drug's release of dopamine, though one can become addicted to any form of pleasure, be it food, sex or even video games.

The U.S needs to be like Portugal and start decriminalizing drug usage and begin treating it like the public health problem that it is. **Business Insider** indicates that while distribution and trafficking are still criminalized, possession and use are moved into special courts "where each offender's unique situation is judged by legal experts, psychologists and social workers."

Addiction and drug usage is then treated by public health services with the policy decreasing the level of drug addiction within Portugal to the point where it's one of the lowest in the European Union. **The Cato Institute's** also indicated that drug-related pathologies such as death by overdose and the spread of STDs, have also dramatically decreased in Portugal since decriminalization took effect in 2001.

While it's unclear that decriminalization will have the same effects on the U.S. as it did in Portugal, we still need to strive to move toward it if only to reverse the damages of the "War on Drugs". With **23 states having legalized medical marijuana**, nine having outright legalization with **Gallup indicating a 60 percent approval rating** on the matter, the government needs to at least decriminalize marijuana usage. Yet, without moving toward the overall decriminalization of drug usage, we may not be able to efficiently tackle the determinate factors of poverty and a fractured criminal justice system.