



Why Mexico's Legalization of Marijuana Is the Right Step to Fight the Cartels

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A few weeks ago, lawmakers in Mexico made certain that fewer Mexicans will die at the hands of the drug cartels. The lower house went against the wishes of 58 percent of Mexican citizens and approved a bill legalizing marijuana. It's certainly a step in the right direction, but if lawmakers truly want to end drug-related violence in Mexico, they'll need to move forward and eventually legalize all illicit drugs.

This bill was based in neither public support nor a desire for increased tax revenues—its central purpose was to reduce cartel violence, which has cost over 150,000 lives in Mexico. According to Mexican congresswoman Lucía Riojas Martínez, legalization “is an important step toward building peace in a country like ours, where for at least a decade or more, we've been immersed in an absurd war.” Martínez is referring to the War on Drugs, a decades-long campaign by the United States, Mexico, and other countries to purge their societies of drug use.

Drug prohibition has also fueled the success of cartels, who have made billions of dollars smuggling drugs into the United States. At the end of the day, these drug cartels exist to fill a consumer demand. The global demand and use of substances are an undeniable part of reality. Consider, for instance, the steady profits of alcohol and tobacco companies, who legally sell recreational drugs. Alcohol and tobacco are directly linked to hundreds of thousands of deaths each year but are unexplainably treated as exceptions.

There is a well-researched scholarly consensus that the War on Drugs has resulted in far more harm than good. While many believe that these policies were instituted in good faith, history reveals that their true purpose was to incarcerate nonviolent criminals, which disproportionately affected people of color. In fact, these policies have directly led to mass incarceration, increased government spending, and countless deaths.

Putting an end to drug-related violence is certainly a worthwhile goal—but in reality, marijuana isn't a cash cow for cartels anymore. Security experts have pointed out that marijuana legalization in many U.S. states has caused cartels to turn to more profitable illicit substances like cocaine, heroin, and fentanyl.

While these drugs are dangerous, it would be better for society if they were supplied by legal markets rather than violent cartels. After decades of failed prohibition, drug use persists, regardless of how harsh the resulting punishments may be.

Some argue that relaxed drug policies would increase drug use, but this is loose thinking at best. In 2001, Portugal decriminalized all drugs and they reported “dramatic drops in overdoses, HIV infection and drug-related crime.” If other countries followed suit, we might see far less drug-related deaths globally.

With that said, it is truly the United States that must reevaluate its drug policies, seeing as American citizens represent one of the largest markets for illicit drugs. Even if Mexico legalized all drugs, as long as the United States maintains prohibition, violent drug cartels will continue to thrive.

Mexico's legalization of marijuana is a step in the right direction, but it won't really solve its problems. If it truly wishes to reduce drug-related violence, end mass incarceration, and improve its society, it needs to do much, much more.

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