

Time to declare a cease fire in war on drugs

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Charlotte, N.C., has joined the ranks of cities where clashes between police and unarmed black or brown males have ended fatally. A total of 788 people have been killed by police this year, according to the latest figures on the Guardian's website, which tracks police killings in America.

Slightly over half of them were white (383), while African-Americans and Hispanics were a close second (324). But if we look at these numbers taking into consideration each respective group's share of the U.S. population, even starker realities are discovered.

Blacks are more than twice, and Hispanics a third, more likely than white people to be victims of police violence (i.e., rates per million calculated were 4.61 and 2.34, respectively, for Blacks and Hispanics/Latinos compared to whites at 1.73). So each day across America, almost two people are shot by police, and there is an increased likelihood that person will be a person of color. The top 3 most dangerous states in terms of police shootings in rank order are California, Texas and Florida, while North Carolina ranks 5th and Ohio, Illinois, and Alabama tie for 9th place.

But looking past the numbers, what is actually taking place, and how can we fix the problem? I would suggest that we have been at war for the past 45 years, and it's time that we declare a cease fire and work toward a livable and viable peace. What war, you ask? The war on drugs, of course.

This war was declared in 1971 to combat what some perceived as a cancer in the body. That drug abuse lied at the heart of social unrest, political dissent, riots, and calls for revolution. Under President Richard Nixon, our police became militarized, as they joined in the international war to end, or at least reduce, the illegal drug trade. Our strategy involved military intervention, military aid, and stiff legal penalties for the production, distribution and consumption of psychoactive drugs. Internationally, we put pressure on our allies, and domestically, we declared drug abuse as "public enemy number one." It is estimated that we spend – across both federal and state budgets – about \$51 billion a year fighting this decades-long war. Over the course of the past 45 years, it is estimated this war has cost us about \$1 trillion. According to a 2010 Cato Institute report, this means that we are spending about \$500 per second.

These costs aside, the real tragedy is in human terms. Of the 1.4 million people in state prisons, 16 percent are there for drug charges, and of the 207,847 in federal prisons, over half are there

for drug crimes. But what does this have to do with police shooting unarmed black and brown and other men? Over this time that we have been at war, the front line troops have been our local police officers. They have been the ones charged with waging this war. And with all wars there are what is termed as “collateral casualties.” In most of the cases, police officers respond that they felt threatened and were forced to shoot. They were acting in the interests of self-protection.

As a consequence, one can understand why some black, Latino, and other men of color feel nervous in the presence of police. It is no wonder that a Sept. 20, 2016, Massachusetts High Court ruling states that “black men have a legitimate reason to flee police.” But is this all that we can do? Suggest that they should flee, knowing that many police will take this as prima facie evidence that the person is guilty of “something”? Perhaps we should not wait until another young man of color is killed by a cop. Perhaps it’s time we declared a cease fire and peace in our war on drugs.

As a Vietnam veteran, I am well aware of PTSD. And while not an excuse for poor decisions, it does allow us to understand it when it happens. Police officers, many of which have been on the front line in this war on drugs, are more likely than not to also suffer from PTSD. And rather than wait for them to break down, we should relieve them of duty. Rotating them in and out of combat with no likelihood that the war will ever end only increases the likelihood that another “accident” will occur and more collateral casualties join our numbers.

If continuing to do the same thing and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity, then what does it mean when we continually fight this war – when no one is winning, and the casualties continue to add up? This is the only viable way to win the peace, since we have clearly lost the war.