

Drug legalization not the answer to current economic problems

By: Patrick White – March 31, 2013

An oft-touted solution to many national problems is to legalize drugs and regulate them, thus providing a new source of revenue. People wouldn't be put in jail for drugs, so they could get on with their lives and get jobs. It's supposedly a win-win situation. However, the legalization of drugs would have several bad consequences that do not get mentioned because of how appealing the potential revenue sounds.

Regulation would still cost money. Take methamphetamine, for example — the cost of police enforcement would not disappear just because citizens aren't being arrested for possession. Decriminalization could never make it legal or safe for a meth lab to be running in a residential area. The chemicals used to cook meth are at great risk of exploding in the process. Even if meth was legal, the dangers of someone wanting homemade instead of store-bought meth would continue. The police would still have to find and shut down meth labs.

Furthermore, drug legalization has been tried before, and it failed to produce the intended effect. According to "Drug Legalization: Myths and Misconceptions," a 1994 manual published by the United States Department of Justice, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands both attempted to legalize drugs. The theory was that if drugs were legal, organized crime would lose a source of income and addicts would not commit theft to get more drugs. It would also, in theory, decrease the number of addicts, since the money once used to combat the drug trade could instead be used for rehabilitation and prevention. The measures failed miserably.

Hypothetically, people would not suddenly become heroin addicts because their jobs would require them to remain clean. In actuality, for the decade that Britain ran the program (1970-1980), the number of addicts increased by 100 percent. Why? The increase was mostly made up of the demographic that didn't have to worry about job security and financial stability — teenagers. The United Kingdom shut down the program because they had used taxpayer money to get everyone's kids on heroin.

The Netherlands are currently reversing their stance on decriminalization because of problems in Amsterdam. Drug use in Amsterdam was not only legal, but also permitted in public. While that was fine on its own, everyone eventually saw a problem when the number of such cafes skyrocketed from around 30 locations in the city to well over 300 in one decade. In addition, drug users accounted for 80 percent of all property crime in the city.

In history class, it was joked that if Imperial China had made the sale of opium legal, it could have controlled its opium epidemic. The real joke is that no one looked into how

the country solved the problem — a real oversight for a history class. China used a three-pronged method to end the opium epidemic. They created a task force centered on arresting drug dealers as opposed to users and created a state-sponsored rehab program which was followed by job training. The program worked.

Perhaps the most influential part of the historical evidence overlooked is that no money was made off of taxing and regulating sales. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands in particular saw that drug trafficking went on as usual because of people's fiscal decisions.

The often-cited Cato Institute study on the amount of money that would be made on the taxation of drugs makes those projections based on rates similar to alcohol and tobacco. This study assumes people would pay taxes on them. If people are fine breaking the law and getting drugs illegally on the street for a certain price now, why would they pay additional money later in the form of taxes on it just because it was legal?

I know the United States is not winning the War on Drugs, but legalization has issues that would be present whether the drug of choice was legal or not. The supposed new revenue source doesn't exist. Legalization makes the problem worse than the current solution of overspending on enforcement.