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Heroin deaths rising, legalization of drug would help save lives

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Let's start by characterizing this properly, in your view. Do we have a heroin epidemic in this country? Or a heroin problem? Or are we trying too hard to label something that doesn't need to be labeled? After all, people die in car crashes every day, but we don't describe it as a "driving problem?"

The United States has a heroin problem, which is that heroin is illegal: this generates unsafe use, such as sharing contaminated needles. The data are mixed on whether heroin use is increasing: self-reports suggest only modestly, while overdose death rates suggest more strongly. In either case, however, the word "epidemic" seems too strong; only a tiny fraction of the population uses heroin.

It is true, though, that we've seen a significant increase in heroin overdose deaths, correct?

Yes, the United States has experienced a substantial increase in heroin overdoses. Some of this plausibly reflects increased use; some more unsafe use; and some reporting artifacts.

Meanwhile, heroin use has also skyrocketed. Why?

Heroin use does not appear to have skyrocketed; self-reported data on drug use suggest only a modest increase, if any.

One plausible explanation for whatever increase we have observed is that law enforcement's attempts to discourage use of prescription opioids have caused demand to shift to illicit opioids like heroin.

You have argued, however, that the spike in deaths does not directly correlate with the increases in usage. Some other factor, therefore, is also contributing to the increase in deaths. What is that factor?

The increase in deaths relative to use per se has most likely occurred because new, inexperienced users have shifted to heroin in response law enforcement crackdowns on prescription opioids.

These users may inadvertently take higher doses than desired, especially because accurate information on purity is scarce in black markets.

You favor legalization of drugs on a broad scale in part because it will help regulate the product and curb the dangers of unpredictable black-market quality. But wouldn't that also increase overall use? If so, is that worth the tradeoff?

Use may well increase under legalization. That said, existing evidence suggests a modest rather than a dramatic increase. Further, some of this increased use will be beneficial for users, such as people suffering chronic pain who cannot now get adequate opioid medication from the medical system or who avoid even seeking such medications because of excessive fears about the risks of these substances.

We should probably put the scope of your support for legalization in perspective. You'd go as far as making heroin, for instance, available on supermarket shelves, perhaps packaged with a Narcan antidote just in case. True?

In my judgment, it should be legal for grocery stores to sell heroin legally, with or without Narcan. I am not sure how many would do so; community pressure might make such a practice an unappealing business decision. Thus heroin might only be available in pharmacies, for example.

As a society we can't even seem to decide whether medicinal marijuana should be legalized, yet you're suggesting we go far beyond that in making even harder drugs readily available. Do you consider yourself a contrarian, or ahead of your time?

My view is that I am going where the evidence leads. Opioids like heroin and morphine were entirely legal and widely available before 1914, when the Harrison Narcotic Act outlawed most of the currently illegal drugs (federal law did not ban marijuana until 1937). When heroin and morphine were fully legal, the country was not full of "addicts" and "junkies". In fact, opioid use fell substantially during the decades leading up to 1914.

Is it too cynical to suggest the uproar over a heroin "epidemic" is fueled primarily by its spread into white suburbia? After all, heroin problems have been with us for a long time.

The fact that heroin is (allegedly) being used more frequently by whites, and middle class teenagers in particular, may play a role in the recent uproar. More broadly, however, uproars over various illegal drugs have come and gone for decades. These episodes may be good ways for prohibitionist forces to gain power and influence.

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