

# Jesse Kline: Mexico opens to door to a ‘market’ solution to drug war

Jesse Kline Sep 23, 2011

June marked the 40th anniversary of when Richard Nixon declared the “war on drugs.” In the four decades since, the drug war has shaped American policy, both foreign and domestic.

If we stick with the war analogy, it’s safe to say that it’s been a bigger failure than Vietnam, but unlike that war, no politician has been willing to cut and run when it comes to drugs. The U.S. has [spent over \\$1-trillion](#) prosecuting the war, but has failed to curb America’s insatiable lust for drugs. Quite the opposite: Illegal drug use has gone up by about 10% in the last 40 years.

According to a recent [United Nations report](#), worldwide consumption of opiates increased 34.5% between 1998 and 2008, marijuana usage increased by 8.5% and cocaine by 27%. The United States imports a majority of its cocaine from Mexico, which has been embroiled in a brutal war among rival gangs for control of the lucrative trade.

Over 42,000 people have been killed in Mexico as a result of gang violence since President Felipe Calderon took office in 2006. Not a moment too soon, it appears the President is starting to recognize that the current approach to dealing with illicit drugs is not working.

“We must do everything to reduce demand for drugs. But if the consumption of drugs cannot be limited, then decision-makers must seek more solutions — including market alternatives — in order to reduce the astronomical earnings of criminal organizations,” [Calderon said](#) in a speech in New York.

Using the term “market alternatives” is a key choice of words. The reason organized crime has so successfully dominated the trade is the blanket prohibition on drugs, forcing the market underground. The same thing happened in the United States when alcohol was made illegal during Prohibition.

The solution to removing the criminal element from the drug trade is the same one that solved the problem with booze: legalize it. Allow drugs to be produced by private industry in a regulated environment. After all, gang violence has become more deadly than the substances they’re peddling. And we don’t see beer companies shooting each other for control of distribution networks.

“We have to take all the production chain out of the hands of criminals and into the hands of producers — so there are farmers that produce marijuana and manufacturers that process it and distributors that distribute it and shops that sell it,” said [Vicente Fox](#), President Calderon’s predecessor, in an interview with *Time* magazine. “They are bad for your health, and you shouldn’t take them. But ultimately, this responsibility is with citizens.”

There was a time when even the voices of two Mexican heads of state would not have made an impact on U.S. drug policy, but there are signs that things are slowly beginning to change. According to the The National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, 41% of the U.S., representing 35% of its population, [has decriminalized marijuana](#), meaning users will not face jail sentences if they’re caught possessing the substance.

And with the U.S. heading full steam towards a budget crisis, the revenue that is foregone by not taxing drugs is looking more appealing every day. A 2005 study out of Harvard University estimates the country could save \$7.7-billion per year by discontinuing the drug war, and raise \$6.2-billion by taxing mind altering substances at similar rates to tobacco and alcohol.

There is also evidence that experiments with legalization in other jurisdictions has produced positive results. In 2001, Portugal took the radical step of decriminalizing the possession of all narcotics, including hard drugs. Money that was previously being spent on enforcement and incarceration was diverted to treatment and rehabilitation programs.

A 2009 study commissioned by the CATO Institute found that in the five years [following decriminalization](#), drug use among teens declined, as did rates of HIV infection. The number of people seeking treatment for drug problems doubled over the period.

Many U.S. states are taking note and backing away from tough-on-crime measures that have caused prison populations to swell with people convicted of victimless crimes, disproportionately hurting minorities, and causing a significant strain on state budgets. Unfortunately, Canada appears to be moving in the opposite direction.

The Harper government’s omnibus crime bill, which was tabled in the House of Commons this week, includes [mandatory minimum sentences](#) for growing small amounts of marijuana and doubles the maximum sentence for pot-related crimes.

While other countries are starting to look for alternatives to the war on drugs, Canada’s Conservative government is doubling down on an expensive and ineffective strategy.