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The Cost of the War on Drugs is Too High

by Nohemi Castaneda-Martinez

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The government is losing the war on drugs. Jails are overcrowded, people continue using, there is not much help for them, by decriminalizing drugs many of these issues will go away and the money that is being spent on jails/prison can be used for treatment of drug users.

The “war on drugs” squanders much of the nation’s wealth and freedom, causing enormous social disruption. Wharton Econometrics estimates that \$6.2 billion dollars are spent on drug related police activities alone, excluding the cost of the courts and prisons. According to the Justice Expenditures and Employment bureau of Justice Statistics, the criminal justice system spent \$40 billion in 1999, three-quarters of which went for police and prisons. Most street and prison gangs control the distribution and production of the drug market. If drugs were no longer criminalized, then the gangs would not be able to make a business out of drugs and it would reduce drug related crimes.

James Ostrowski wrote an article for the CATO institute regarding this subject and described the following scenario: On Thursday, March 17, 1988, at 10:45 pm., in the Bronx, stray bullets fired in a dispute over illegal drugs killed Vernia Brown. The 19-year-old mother of one was not involved in the dispute, yet her death was a direct consequence of the “war on drugs.” If drugs were legalized, perhaps Vernia Brown may still be alive. Prohibition of recreational drugs must be repealed. Drug related murders are the primary result of drug prohibition.

Jack Shafer published an article titled “The War on Drugs is Over-The government Has Lost” where he brings statistical data showing how drug prohibition causes at least 8,250 deaths each year, as indicated: The annual deaths caused by drug prohibition consists in 1,600 murders incidents to street crime, 750 black market murders, 3,500 drug related AIDS, 2,400 poisoned drugs/no quality control, totaling 8,250 deaths.

However, the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) argues that legalization of drugs in any form would “reduce perception of the risks and cost of use, increasing availability, demand, and addiction”. At the same time, these same officials are not able to cite any study that demonstrates the beneficial effects of drug prohibition when weighed against its cost, not only the lost of human lives but also the amount of money that it takes to fight the “war on drugs”.

It is instructive to note the parallel between the current debate over the drug problems of today over the alcohol problems in the twenties and thirties. In the earlier debate one side called for intensified enforcement efforts, while the other called for outright repeal of the alcohol prohibition. The rate of assaults with a firearm rose with prohibition of alcohol and declined for ten consecutive years after the end of alcohol prohibition. Drive by shootings began during prohibition. Repeal did not end alcoholism, as indeed prohibition did not either. But the repeal of prohibition did solve many of the problems created by prohibition, such as corruption, murder, poisoned alcohol and prison overcrowding. We can expect no more and no less from the decriminalization of drugs today. The money used to build new jails and prisons can be used instead for treatment of drug users and our community would be better off with less prisons and more recovered drug addicts.

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