

# End the War on Drugs

By Jonathan Pedde, Staff Columnist

Published on Monday, May 23, 2011

---

Over the past two weeks, tens of thousands of Mexico City residents took to the streets to protest their country's continuing drug violence. In light of the obvious suffering caused by the continuing violence, we need to re-evaluate the war on drugs.

I hate drugs. They ruin the lives of many users and impose severe costs on users' families and communities.

Unfortunately, the developed world's criminalization of many drugs has been neither effective nor free from unintended consequences. Though we may wish to judge the war on drugs by the good intentions of those who instigate it, we must evaluate it based on the abysmal outcomes that it has produced.

The war is not succeeding: The United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that 5 percent of the world's adult population still uses illegal drugs and that the global drug industry is worth \$320 billion. Most discouragingly, countries with harsher drug laws do not have fewer drug users than countries with more lenient laws.

This failure is not due to a lack of law enforcement effort. The United States spends almost \$45 billion a year enforcing prohibition and makes 1.5 million drug-related arrests annually. In 1980, there were only 41,000 Americans in jail on drug-related charges. Today, there are 500,000. What do we have to show for this? Not much. Consider cocaine, for instance, which used to be grown in Columbia and then flown by plane across the Caribbean into the United States. When the U.S. government closed down this route, cocaine importation just moved to Mexico.

Furthermore, prohibition has not been without unintended consequences. Indeed, much of the harm caused by drugs is precisely due to the fact that they are illegal. For normal, legal businesses, murdering your competitors is not a viable business strategy. For businesses that exist outside of the legal system, this strategy is not only viable but commonplace. In Mexico alone, 40,000 people have died in drug-related violence over the last four years.

But the violence of the drug trade is not prohibition's only harmful effect. By making drug use illegal, we have turned otherwise law-abiding citizens into criminals. America has the highest incarceration rate in the world — nearly five times the world average — which is primarily due to tough drug laws. According to Human Rights Watch, "More people are sent to prison in the United States for nonviolent drug offenses than for crimes of violence."

The war on drugs has also widened racial inequalities in the United States, and young black males bear the brunt of drug-related mass incarceration. One in every 20 black men over the age of 18 is currently behind bars, and one in every five black men will be incarcerated sometime over the course of their lives. Young white men use marijuana more than young black men, yet members of the latter group are more likely to be arrested for possession of this substance. Obviously, a criminal record is detrimental to an individual's future success, so racial disparities across a variety of measures, including educational achievement and lifetime

income, are undoubtedly related to these high rates of drug-related incarceration.

But wouldn't legalization lead to large increases in drug usage? Actually, probably not. Ten years ago, Portugal abolished all criminal penalties for personal possession of all drugs. According to the Cato Institute, drug usage in Portugal has fallen and the number of people seeking treatment for drug addictions has doubled.

Instead of criminalizing the production and use of drugs, we should legalize and tax these activities while supporting greater prevention and treatment programs. Harvard economist Jeffrey Miron calculated that drug legalization in the United States “would save roughly \$48.7 billion per year in government expenditure” and “would yield tax revenue of \$34.3 billion annually, assuming legal drugs are taxed at rates comparable to those on alcohol and tobacco.” Furthermore, legalization would bring the drug trade into the sunlight, thereby ending the drug wars that have destroyed far too many human lives.

I realize that drug legalization would be messy. But the alternative — continuing the failed war on drugs — would be even worse.

Copyright 1993-2011 | The Dartmouth, Inc. | All rights reserved.

Content, design, and code may not be reproduced without explicit written permission.