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'War on drugs' behind endless misery

By **Evan Wood**, Special to CNN
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***Editor's note:** Evan Wood is the founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy; the director of the Urban Health Program at the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS and associate professor in the Department of Medicine, University of British Columbia.*

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

Evan Wood: Scores killed in Jamaica in attempt to nab suspected drug lord

War on drugs has created a violent underground with billions to be made, Wood says

Thousands of people die and gangs kill for profits, yet drugs get more plentiful, he writes

Wood: Scientific, health-based approach instead of criminal approach works elsewhere

(CNN) -- The news of intense drug-related violence out of Jamaica is shocking and dreadful but entirely predictable. Wherever the war on drugs touches down, death and destruction result. A recent target is Kingston, Jamaica.

When law enforcement attempted to smoke out Christopher "Dudus" Coke, wanted in the U.S. for conspiracy to distribute marijuana and cocaine and to traffic in firearms, scores of people died in the urban warfare. The death toll reached 73 civilians as Jamaicans were caught in the crossfire between police, soldiers and armed thugs.

Rival drug gangs used the confusion to eliminate their enemies and further ratchet up the violence. Coke has since agreed to surrender to officials in New York, because he "feels it is in his best interest to be taken to the U.S. rather than to a Jamaican jail," sources told the Jamaican Observer, but not before scores of people died.

Given that the scenes of violence between rival drug gangs are so common, people often fail to consider the factors that fuel this violence. The reality is that Jamaicans are just the latest victims in a misguided and expensive war that has taken countless thousands of lives, from the streets of New York to the slums and shantytowns of Colombia, Mexico and other third-world nations.

When law enforcement attempted to smoke out Christopher "Dudus" Coke ... scores of people died in the urban warfare.

--Evan Wood

In more than four decades since former U.S. President Nixon first declared America's "war on drugs," the battles against spreading disease, increasing violence and the ongoing destruction of families and neighborhoods have been lost.

Mexico, a country all too familiar with violence as a way of life, is today a stark example of how crackdowns on drug cartels by American and local law enforcement agencies have utterly failed.

The horrible drug-related violence in Mexico was intensified by President Felipe Calderón, with strong U.S. support. This crackdown has resulted in about 23,000 drug-related deaths across the country since 2006. The bloodiest war has been fought in Juárez, a besieged city

of 1.3 million on the U.S. border, where 5,100 people have been killed since 2008.

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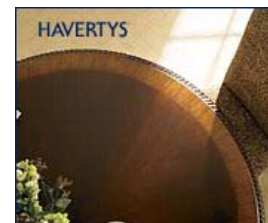
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The global drug war has created a massive illicit market with an estimated annual value of \$320 billion. In April, the newly created International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, of which I am founder, released a review of every English-language study to examine the link between drug law enforcement and violence.

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The review clearly demonstrates that the astronomical profits created by drug prohibition drive organized crime and its related violence. Several studies included in the report suggested that law enforcement's removal of key players from the drug trade, such as Christopher Coke, only creates power vacuums that lead to violent and deadly competition. Many victims are not involved in the drug trade, as today's civilian deaths in Mexico, the U.S. and Kingston's slums illustrate.

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--Evan Wood

The war on drugs has generated a lucrative, cash-rich industry that has -- not surprisingly -- lured poverty-stricken participants from throughout the impoverished third world. In West Africa, entire countries, such as Guinea-Bissau, are at risk of becoming "narco-states" as Colombian cocaine traffickers employ West African trade routes to distribute cocaine into destination markets in Europe, Russia and the Middle East.

Estimates now suggest that 27 percent of all cocaine destined for Europe is transited through West Africa and is worth more than \$1.8 billion annually wholesale -- and as much as 10 times that amount at the retail level. Illicit drugs are big business, with the influence and global reach that goes along with the ability to create widespread wealth.

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Another conclusion of the review was the clear evidence that drug law enforcement has failed to reduce the availability of illegal drugs.

From a scientific perspective, we must accept that law enforcement will never meaningfully reduce the flow of drugs. Economists know that the drug seizures we see over and over again as part of police photo ops have the perverse effect of making it that much more profitable for someone else to sell drugs. The laws of supply and demand have simply overwhelmed police efforts. With young people reporting that obtaining illicit drugs is easier than getting alcohol or tobacco, the situation could not get much worse.

Strong scientific evidence points to the effectiveness of alternative regulatory models established in Portugal, the Netherlands and Switzerland to counter the disastrous consequences of illicit drug use and drug policies.

The [Cato Institute](#), a respected U.S. think tank, has released a report on alternative drug policies. Several years ago, Portugal parted ways with the U.S. and decriminalized all drugs so that resources could focus on prevention and treatment of drug use. The report shows Portugal's policies have dramatically reduced HIV rates as drug addiction has been viewed as a health, rather than criminal justice, problem. In addition, Portugal now has the lowest rates of marijuana use in the European Union, with experts suggesting that the health focus has taken some of the glamour out of illegal drugs.

Similarly, the de facto regulation of marijuana in the Netherlands and distribution through licensed coffee shops generates tax revenue for the country rather than profits for organized crime. Interestingly, rates of marijuana use in the [Netherlands](#) remain far lower than those in the U.S. Consider this against the backdrop of the mayhem in Mexico, much of which is driven by fighting to control the marijuana export industry.

The American "get tough" approach, although politically popular in certain circles, has failed to achieve its intended objectives: The supply of illicit drugs has increased, the costs of illicit drugs have

dropped, and drug purity has risen. The mounting bloodshed in Mexico and the recent mayhem in Jamaica clearly demonstrate that the U.S. is exporting violence, breaking up families and increasing the taxpayer burden to help fight these fruitless battles.

Americans themselves are suffering deeply from these misguided policies. It's time to just say no to the war on drugs and to implement science-based alternative policy models that are proving effective in other parts of the world.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Evan Wood.

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TheFinalWerd

I find it funny that drugs are illegal yet the senate and congress vote down their random drug tests saying it violates their freedoms.

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papaskip

drug laws, like religions, are instruments of social control. look at the enormous disparity between crack and powder cocaine sentences. bottom line: they can put me in a cage cause i like to get high. addiction is a serious problem, but the solutions must be medical, not legal.

2 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



Schnoogs

silly logic...serial killers suffer from mental problems...I guess the solution should be medical and not legal?

0 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)



CosmicSnoop

We citizens can fix this like we stopped Prohibition, it's simple. If you get put on a jury for a drug crime, do not convict the person. OK, if he committed some murders or something, fine. But if it's a trial for simple possession or dealing, don't convict. That is how Prohibition ended, look it up... [more](#)

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gsp67

There are certain drugs which are relatively hsrmlless and probably should be decriminilized. Others are too dangerous to be made legal. Doing so is ignoring history; ask the Chinese what opium did to their population. Look at our own country and the things that "crack" cocain and heroin have done... [more](#)
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walkerny

Jamaica's "endless misery" is due largely to it's failure to develop reasonable family planning. When the poor do not plan their family, they doom themselves and their children to continued poverty.
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CopsKillkids

THANK YOU CNN!! Thank you so much for having the balls to publish something that has been taboo for decades. For years, anyone who saw the insanity of this atrocity has been cast aside as a "druggie" or an insane person. Mainstream media is finally paying attention to this horrible policy. Thank... [more](#)
5 minutes ago | [Like \(3\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



ArioneTucker

The United States will never decriminalize drugs. In fact, our economy would crumple without them. The trillions of dollars the drug trade creates fuels our economy. Where industry was once the bedrock of our nations success, today our economy is crime and punishment driven. Without the dollars ... [more](#)
5 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



Schnoogs

what you've just said is one of the most insanely idiotic things I have ever heard. At no point in your rambling, incoherent response were you even close to anything that could be considered a rational thought. Everyone in this room is now dumber for having listened to it. I award you no points, and... [more](#)
4 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



BrianME

Legalize it, then tax the hell out of it. Let's balance the federal budget off the chumps who want to get high, give the rest of us a break
5 minutes ago | [Like \(4\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



Anononymouse

Drugs would be eliminated in America, if drug users were fine \$1M and put in jail for 10 years of hard time. The jails need to be simple. 6 foot cubes, water and bread for food, a hole for a toilet and a hose down every week! Treat the drug users like the animals they are! Sellers of drugs - they ge... [more](#)
6 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)



Carlston

Wait, so what about crime...it's not the robbers fault it's the rich people for having stuff to steal. Just like the stupid excuses for Mexcio.They let crime control their leaders and country, they used bribes to turn the other way...now once again it's the people they victimizes fault, well America... [more](#)
6 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)



sincamisa

Cops! Sheesh they are at it again making our streets unsafe for us. I say we take back our streets form the gang in blue. They are often turning out to be a brother of thugs ...now also funded, in a way, by drug money.
7 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)



cbp4s

I'm not sure if that was meant to be sarcastic or not, but oddly enough you make a true and valid point.

5 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Qodex*

For those supporting the war on drugs, the facts are irrelevant. Seriously, they couldn't care less how many innocent and not-quite-innocent lives are lost or the extend of the economic carnage, if it means giving up one iota of their legal authority to dictate that others live according to their p... [more](#)

7 minutes ago | [Like \(2\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*VocalCitizen*

Gee... where have I heard this argument before? OH yes!!! I've been spouting it for years! This wonderful article is most definitely NOT the first of its kind (see my iReports for dozens like it) but it was lucky enough to make it in the CNN mainstream. Now, if only the media would take this issue as... [more](#)

7 minutes ago | [Like \(2\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Isolated*

Yes, it's not exactly a new point of view. However, I'm glad for the fact that it was well-written and made the CNN front page.

3 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Antinomian*

Nixon passed the CSA on the false assurance that the Schafer Commission would later justify criminalizing his enemies, but he underestimated Schafer's integrity. No amendments can assure due process under an anti-science law without due process itself. Psychology hailed the breakthrough potential of... [more](#)

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kool aid for the win

2 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)*jim bills*

Fantastic article with strong reasoning why drugs should be legalized, taxed, and monitored. Having said that, anyone who buys illegal drugs now should realize that their choice to do something illegal contibutes directly to the bloodshed and misery we're seeing in places like Jamaica and Mexico - w... [more](#)

8 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Qodex*

And what should the purveyors of those laws realize?

2 minutes ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Mertes*

awesome article, but good luck convincing most people...the govt has spent a lot of time spreading propaganda and ignorance...and very rarely are they willing to admit they were/are wrong about anything so i think the war on drugs is probably an endless one..

8 minutes ago | [Like \(1\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Henry Miller*

The American "get tough" approach is politically popular only with self-righteous, authoritarian, jerks who can't keep their noses out of other people's business. Unfortunately, that includes essentially all present-day Republicans, the neo-cons, and, apparently most politicians in general, regardl... [more](#)

8 minutes ago | [Like \(3\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)*Schnoogs*

where as libtards and their totalitarian approach have no interest putting the government's nose in other people's business.

You sir are a moron

1 minute ago | [Like](#) | [Report abuse](#)



• *Qodex*

If God had meant for us to take drugs, he would have created plants like marijuana. Oh, wait...

12 minutes ago | [Like \(15\)](#) | [Report abuse](#)

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