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Evan Wood: Conservatives should get weak on drugs

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[Evan Wood](#)

Citizens from across the political spectrum have largely considered illicit drugs such as cocaine and marijuana a grave threat to Canadian society. Accordingly, promises to get tough on drugs are proven vote-spinners for politicians coast-to-coast.

Not surprisingly, the mandatory minimum sentences for drug law violations proposed by the Harper government prior to prorogation received unconditional support from the federal Liberals. However, in more than four decades since former U.S. president Richard Nixon first declared America's "War on Drugs," researchers from across scientific disciplines have been closely examining the impacts of law enforcement strategies aimed at controlling illicit drug use. The findings clearly demonstrate that politically popular "get tough" approaches actually make the drug problem worse, fuel crime and violence, add to government deficits, rob the public purse of potential revenue, help spread disease and divide families.

In fact, the tough on crime approach takes its biggest toll on the traditional conservative wish list of fiscal discipline, low crime rates and strong families.

At a 1991 lecture called *The Drug War as a Socialist Enterprise*, conservative economist and Nobel Prize winner Milton Friedman noted: "There are some general features of a socialist enterprise, whether it's the Post Office, schools or the war on drugs. The enterprise is inefficient, expensive, very advantageous to a small group of people and harmful to a lot of people."

Friedman's views about the certain failure of the war on drugs are shared by most economists who stress that costly efforts to remove drug supply by building prisons and locking up drug dealers have the perverse effect of making it that much more profitable for new drug dealers to get into the market. This simple fact explains why — despite \$2.5-trillion spent in America's war on drugs — drugs are more freely and easily available today than at any time in North American history.

Professor Friedman was vocal about the unintended consequences of the war on drugs, including the enrichment of organized crime and drug market violence. As he wrote in *The New York Times*: "Compared with the returns from a traditional career of study and hard work, returns from dealing drugs are tempting to young and old alike. And many, especially

the young, are not dissuaded by the bullets that fly so freely in disputes between competing drug dealers — bullets that fly only because dealing drugs is illegal. Al Capone epitomizes our earlier attempt at Prohibition; the Crips and Bloods epitomize this one.”

Recently, the University of British Columbia’s Urban Health Research Initiative, of which I am director, released a review of every English-language study to examine the link between drug law enforcement and violence. The review clearly demonstrates that the astronomical profits created by drug prohibition drive organized crime and related violence. This report was externally reviewed and endorsed by Harvard Economics Professor Jeffrey Miron and Professor Stephen Easton, a senior fellow at the conservative-leaning Fraser Institute.

Health researchers have also noted the consistent link between excessive reliance on drug law enforcement and increased health-related harms. Chief among the public health concerns is the transmission of HIV among injection drug users. According to the UN Reference Group on HIV and Injection Drug Use, the largest numbers of drug injectors live in China, the U.S. and Russia. These three nations also have among the world’s most punitive drug laws and lead the world in the number of incarcerated individuals. Considering that HIV is an infectious disease that is known to spread among drug addicted-prisoners and that each case of HIV is estimated to cost the Canadian health system an average of \$250,000, the taxpayer is again the loser.

The war on drugs has also had a devastating impact on families. Primarily as a result of drug law enforcement, one in eight African-American males in the age group 25 to 29 is incarcerated on any given day in the U.S., despite the fact that ethnic minorities consume illicit drugs at comparable rates to other subpopulations in the U.S. In addition to the budgetary implications of this experiment, sociologists and criminologists are now describing the intergenerational effects of these policies on low-income families, as children left behind by incarcerated parents turn to gangs and the cycle continues.

The Cato Institute, a respected U.S. think tank, recently released a report on alternative drug policies. It specifically focused on Portugal, which several years ago parted ways with the U.S. and decriminalized all drugs so that resources could focus on prevention and treatment of drug use. The Cato report demonstrates clearly how 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.

As Professor Friedman said, “If you look at the drug war from a purely economic point of view, the role of the government is to protect the drug cartel.” Regardless of when the federal government re-tables plans to enact mandatory minimum sentences for drug law violations, Canadians should contact their MPs — Conservative, Liberal or otherwise — and let them know that they don’t want tax dollars to be flushed into politically popular but ineffective drug-war schemes.

Excessive drug law enforcement and mandatory minimum sentences for drug law violations channel tax dollars from health and education, increase drug violence in the short term and will create negative impacts in the long-term by turning petty drug offenders into hard-core criminals. Conservatives should look at this ongoing legacy in light of their traditional commitment to stronger families, economies and societies, and act accordingly.

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