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# Viewpoints: It's time to pull the plug on the war against drugs

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Any strategy that has been tried for 40 years, cost almost a trillion dollars, led to numerous murders and horrendous violence, ruined millions of lives and destabilized nations needs to be re-evaluated. Unfortunately, despite the failure of our "war on drugs," our drug policy debate remains stagnant and mired in fear-mongering. Empirical evidence supporting alternative policies is disregarded or is the subject of vicious politically motivated attacks.

The war on drugs has overwhelmed the justice system and empowered street gangs who finance their activities by drug sales. It has resulted in corruption, lost productivity, environmental destruction, a lack of respect for law, a skyrocketing incarceration rate, destruction of families and a hit to taxpayers' pockets. There is no evidence that things will get better if we continue to follow the same failed strategies.

The logic behind our drug policy is punitive deterrence, which assumes that targeting the drug supply through aggressive law enforcement will deter drug use by making drugs scarcer, more expensive and riskier to buy. However, more than three decades after declaring war, passing stricter laws and packing our prisons, drugs are cheaper, purer and more easily available, and use has not been reduced.

Our appetite for drugs has created billionaires in South America. Cartels have fought with governments and one another to control transport and sales to the United States. Last year in Mexico, 7,724 people, including police chiefs, mayors and government officials, were murdered – so that our drug users could have a supply of marijuana, cocaine and methamphetamines.

The main premise of the war against drugs is that prohibited drugs are highly addictive and dangerous to people's health. It is a questionable assumption. Recent research has shown that nicotine and alcohol are more addictive than cocaine. Nicotine is the most addictive and deadly drug, responsible for approximately half a million deaths a year, yet we don't pack our prisons with cigarette smokers. Alcohol kills almost 100,000 a year; however, we not only allow alcohol sales, alcohol consumption is glamorized. Compared to deaths caused by legal recreational drugs, the average number of fatalities from illicit drug use is about 17,000 a year. Additionally, marijuana, which is the most widely used illegal drug in America (more than 100 million Americans have admitted to using it at least once; up to 40 million report regular use), is the least dangerous drug. No known fatalities related to marijuana overdose have ever been reported.

One of the most revealing things about drug laws is that harshness doesn't influence drug use. Despite having the most severe punishments against drug use in the Western world, drug use in the United States is the highest among industrialized nations. The Netherlands has allowed coffee shops to sell small quantities of marijuana since 1972. Yet, the easy availability of marijuana has not translated into higher hard drug use. Cocaine or heroin use in the Netherlands is significantly lower than in the United States. The Dutch experience provides us with empirical proof that judicious decriminalization works better than the punitive approach.

An even more relevant example is Portugal, which in 2001 became the first European country to officially abolish all criminal penalties for personal possession of drugs, including marijuana, cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. In an analysis by the libertarian Cato Institute in 2006, it was determined that in the five years after personal possession was decriminalized, illegal drug use among teens in Portugal declined and rates of new HIV infections caused by sharing of dirty needles dropped, while the number of people seeking treatment for drug addiction more than doubled. Following decriminalization, Portugal had the lowest rate of lifetime marijuana use in people over 15 in the European Union. The lifetime reported marijuana use in Portugal is 10 percent, in the United States it is almost 40 percent.

Portugal, the Netherlands and other EU countries, which have far more liberal drug laws, should be a lesson to us. We have championed a hard-line drug policy with a focus on drug prohibition and some of the world's harshest penalties for drug possession and sales. Yet, we have the highest rates of cocaine and marijuana use in the world.

The United States could learn from the positive steps taken by Canada, Portugal, Britain, the Netherlands and a host of other nations to decriminalize illicit drugs and pursue a drug control policy that treats drug use as a medical, not criminal, issue. A simple step of not enforcing marijuana laws alone would save us more than 750,000 arrests a year. In 2008, more than 1.7 million were arrested for drug offenses; 754,224 of these arrests were for marijuana possession.

Drug abuse should be framed as a public health issue and not a law enforcement issue. We must consider decriminalizing drug use and placing production and distribution of recreational drugs under governmental control, with an emphasis on harm reduction by treatment instead of incarceration. The end of the war on drugs would wipe out illegal commerce, street gangs and drug cartels, and reduce corruption, homicides and violence, while saving billions of dollars in interdiction and social costs every year. It also would provide the treasury with billions in taxes and significantly lower our prison population.

Our drug enforcement strategy has consistently failed in its aims. It is time to try strategies that have been shown to work elsewhere.

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