



## Arresting AIDS

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**The Oregonian Editorial Board**

If some of the world's top AIDS researchers sign a radical manifesto linking drug policy to AIDS prevention, and the world shrugs it off, how radical is it, really?

Scientists and other AIDS experts who have signed the Vienna Declaration -- 14,756 people in all, as of Friday -- appear to have a "tree that falls in the forest" problem. They're doing their best to shout in the world's ear, but the world thus far doesn't seem to be taking much notice.

That's unfortunate, because the scientists' point is important, whether or not you agree. Their message: The war on drugs is not only an abysmal failure, but in some countries it is aiding and abetting the AIDS epidemic.

By driving drug users underground, and away from clean needle exchanges and other public health programs, the "war" tends to multiply barriers between drug users and the testing and treatment services drug users need. That makes it more -- not less -- likely that drug users will ultimately acquire the HIV virus and spread it.

The number of countries in which people inject illegal drugs is growing. And outside of sub-Saharan Africa, drug use by injection already accounts for roughly one in three new cases of HIV. (In some areas of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where the virus is spreading fastest, the researchers said, 70 percent or even 80 percent of injection drug users are already infected with the virus.)

Certainly, this is not a call to decriminalize drug use, look the other way, or ignore the pain, tragedy and suffering inflicted by drug use. But it might be wise to stop, rethink and retool our approach. There isn't much evidence that increasing "the ferocity of law enforcement meaningfully reduces the prevalence of drug use," as the Vienna Declaration puts it.

Recently, R. Gil Kerlikowske, the former Seattle police chief who now directs U.S. drug-control policy (we don't call them "czars" anymore, apparently) admitted that the 40-year-old war on drugs here has not been a success.

What the international AIDS researchers were trying to point out is that the war's casualty count includes some people with newly acquired HIV infections. In the United States, roughly 56,300 people find out each year that they have the infection, and about 12 percent of these are injection drug users. (Of the 1 million people here already living with HIV, about 19 percent acquired it from using drugs. Roughly the same percentage of that million don't know they have the infection, which means they may very well still be spreading the disease, whether through shared needles or sex.)

Last year, the libertarian Cato Institute reported that Portugal's drug-decriminalization experiment -- eliminating jail time for drug users but not dealers -- has dramatically decreased HIV infections acquired via dirty needles. These went from nearly 1,400 in 2000 to about 400 in 2006.

We're certainly not prepared to endorse the Vienna Declaration. But it does deserve a much wider audience. If you care about arresting the spread of AIDS, read the declaration at [www.viennadeclaration.com](http://www.viennadeclaration.com) and think about it for yourself. Clearly, this is not just a matter of drugs, but of life and death -- and preventing the ravages of a terrible disease.

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