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Posted on Sun, Apr. 26, 2009 10:15 PM

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MARY SANCHEZ COMMENTARY

## Aiding former drug felons is bad for the prison business

The latest pamphlet pushing the idea of decriminalizing drug use arrived in the mail as an interesting piece of propaganda.

The Cato Institute booklet detailed Portugal's success. Seven years ago the country performed what might seem like a legal sleight of hand.

Portugal "decriminalized" but didn't "legalize" drug use and possession, meaning heroin and cocaine possession and use now are administrative infractions not worthy of prison sentences or criminal records. Drug trafficking still can send someone to the slammer.

I begin here because the topic of drug addiction and the often unfair and backward way the U.S. tries to manage the resulting problems always evokes the same response. The solution, many insist, is to simply legalize drugs.

No way. No how. The U.S. is so far from this intriguing idea that it will long remain the stuff of think tanks.

A former cocaine addict said it best: "You can buy stock in prisons."

That's Randall Graves, a student at Metropolitan Community College-Penn Valley. He hopes one day to earn a master's degree in social work and help people like the lost soul he once felt like.

Graves is well aware that drug use and its resulting tentacles in the prison system make for a stable business model with layers of employees and management that are not easily shifted.

"Our penal system, it's big business," he said. "It's not about rehabilitation."

Graves has been sober more than two years. The 52-year-old once was sentenced to five years for possession of two rocks of crack cocaine. He can cite the case of an acquaintance who received 90 days for three ounces of powder cocaine. In other words, a shorter sentence for more of the same basic drug.

This is not to argue for exonerating people who — to support a drug habit or while addled on some substance — commit violent crimes or such property crimes as burglary.

But the discrepancies show how distant the nation is from addressing addiction as the illness it is, rather than a crime.

Another step toward that goal is the effort of Missouri Sen. Yvonne Wilson, a Kansas City Democrat. She has proposed a bill that would allow ex-drug felons access to food stamps.

Right now, you can kill someone, serve your time in prison, be released and still be eligible for food stamps, but drug felons who leave prison can't receive such help. Wilson's bill would allow an ex-drug felon who is sober and otherwise qualifies for food stamps to receive the aid, which could help a person remain stable and out of prison.

Unless, of course, making a profit via prisons is more of a motivator than having sober and productive citizens.

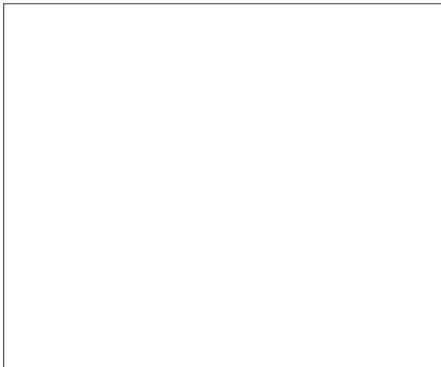
To reach Mary Sanchez, call 816-234-4752 or send e-mail to [msanchez@kcstar.com](mailto:msanchez@kcstar.com).

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**TheGrouch wrote on 4/28/2009 8:14:26 AM:**

Portugal decriminalized drugs, not legalized. It's still illegal to possess drugs, but the penalty for holding up to 10 days personal use is now a civil, rather than a criminal, violation. Several states and cities within the US have decriminalized small amounts of some drugs. Their experience must be the same, reduced use and lower criminal costs. If not, the glory bound conservatives would be touting the horrors of decriminalization at the highest volume. The "drug war" has been as effective as the Vietnam Conflict. But it is now an industry and it has armed the everyday police force to paramilitary capacity. Those business machines that thrive off of the fear of a drug culture spend millions in influence peddling, so don't worry about the US trying something like decriminalization.

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**Twofour wrote on 4/27/2009 9:36:17 PM:**

Rocket, you don't know any crack heads do you? I'm sure you don't know any crack dealers.


Outlawing of drugs has driven the price to unbelievable heights.

Students at the top of their class in junior high have moved out of their families house and into the world of dealing. Why? They can make hundreds of thousands of dollars in a short while. This is somewhat better than working in a fast food restaurant. Isn't it?

People have many addictions. Drugs is one of them. Treat the addiction. We don't jail people for being addicted to alcohol, cigarettes or sodas. Why drugs?


Drug dealers deal drugs because now that they are outlawed they turn an unbelievable profit and for no other reason. Cut out that profit and the dealer is like Chucklowe says, a ZERO.

By the way, I've locked up many dealers. I've interviewed many as well. When asked if they would do it again, they say. "In a minute, the moneys too good and oh what I can do with that money!"

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**chucklowe wrote on 4/27/2009 6:02:30 PM:**

Rocket-you gotta a point. Still, this War on Drug thing is a total failure on every level. The stats they throw at you are manipulation to maintain power and money. I am not saying sell crank legally, but it is way past time to to get some fresh eyes and new ideas other than warehousing more and more of the population.

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**rocket wrote on 4/27/2009 9:40:16 AM:**

I'll give you that the US seems obsessed with locking people up...But no rational human being alive would want crank or crack to be available and legal.....Totally naive...Have you ever known "speed"addicts?In your pie in the sky Libertarian utopia....Would you want to raise your kids next door to people smoking legal crank everyday?.....Decriminalize pot if you must.....but insane to go any further.....Portugal and America are apples and oranges.....Could you imagine a powder keg city like LA on legalized crank.....

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**chucklowe wrote on 4/27/2009 7:53:21 AM:**

The war on drugs was lost the day it was declared. Informative article. Spend the billions we now spend on a failed crusade that our national ego was taught to love by opportunistic politicians, on interdiction and treatment. Reduce violent crime and gangs. Gang members go from heroes to zeros. Addressing this problem will not be easy, and, easy to criticize by those standing to lose pay checks and power. All that notwithstanding, this approach will be light years better than the system in place.

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**boboberg** wrote on 4/27/2009 2:13:56 AM:

The author is right, Portugal decriminalized all drugs in 2001 and their experience has been positive. The police have basically backed off now if you are caught with a 10 day supply of your drug or less you face an administrative court, not a criminal court. We can do that here in the USA. A group of 20,000 very serious policemen, prosecutors and attorneys have formed a group to legalize ALL drugs, Law Enforcement Against Prohibition (<http://leap.cc>) They see what happened when we legalized alcohol in 1932 as a good example of how drug legalization would work. We can't stop drugs. They're sick of chasing drug users and sending innocent people to prison for decades just because they like to get high. This foolish war on drugs has lasted 37 years and cost us over a TRILLION dollars and we are not an inch closer to stopping drugs. How many millions of Americans are we going to lock up in prison for decades? Legalize ALL drugs now. Mark Montgomery boboberg@nyc.rr.com

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