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Better world: Legalise drugs

09 September 2009 by [Clare Wilson](#)
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Far from protecting us and our children, the war on drugs is making the world a much more dangerous place.

SO FAR this year, about 4000 people have died in Mexico's drugs war - a horrifying toll. If only a good fairy could wave a magic wand and make all illegal drugs disappear, the world would be a better place.

Dream on. Recreational drug use is as old as humanity, and has not been stopped by the most draconian laws. Given that drugs are here to stay, how do we limit the harm they do?

The evidence suggests most of the problems stem not from drugs themselves, but from the fact that they are illegal. The obvious answer, then, is to make them legal.

The argument most often deployed in support of the status quo is that keeping drugs illegal curbs drug use among the law-abiding majority, thereby reducing harm overall. But a closer look reveals that this really doesn't stand up. In the UK, as in many countries, the real clampdown on drugs started in the late 1960s, yet government statistics show that the number of [heroin](#) or [cocaine](#) addicts seen by the health service has grown ever since - from around 1000 people per year then, to 100,000 today. It is a pattern that has been repeated the world over.

A second approach to the question is to look at whether fewer people use drugs in countries with stricter drug laws. In 2008, the World Health Organization looked at 17 countries and found no such correlation. The US, despite its punitive drug policies, has one of the highest levels of drug use in the world ([PLoS Medicine](#), vol 5, p e141).

A third strand of evidence comes from what happens when a country softens its drug laws, as Portugal did in 2001. While dealing remains illegal in Portugal, personal use of all drugs has been decriminalised. The result? Drug use has stayed roughly constant, but ill health and deaths from drug taking have fallen. "Judged by virtually every metric, the Portuguese decriminalisation framework has been a resounding success," states a [recent report](#) by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington DC.

By any measure, making drugs illegal fails to achieve one of its primary objectives. But it is the unintended consequences of prohibition that make the most compelling case against it. Prohibition fuels [crime](#) in many ways: without state aid, addicts may be forced to fund their habit through robbery, for instance, while youngsters can be drawn into the drugs trade as a way to earn money and status. In countries such as Colombia and Mexico, the profits from illegal drugs have spawned armed criminal organisations whose resources rival those of the state. Murder, kidnapping and corruption are rife.

Making drugs illegal also makes them more dangerous. The lack of access to clean needles for drug users who inject is a major factor in the spread of lethal viruses such as [HIV](#) and hepatitis C.



Staff from the Central Bureau of Narcotics destroy the opium poppy crop, Kashmir, India (Image: Sipa Press / Rex)

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So what's the alternative? There are several models for the legal provision of recreational drugs. They include prescription by doctors, consumption at licensed premises or even sale on a similar basis to alcohol and tobacco, with health warnings and age limits. If this prospect appeals you, consider the fact that in the US today, many teenagers [say they find it easier to buy cannabis than beer](#).

Taking any drug - including alcohol and nicotine - does have health risks, but a legal market would at least ensure that the substances people ingest or inject are available unadulterated and at known dosages. Much of the [estimated \\$300 billion](#) earned from illegal drugs worldwide, which now funds crime, corruption and [environmental destruction](#), could support legitimate [jobs](#). And instead of spending tens of billions enforcing prohibition, governments would gain income from taxes that could be spent on medical treatment for the small proportion of users who become addicted or whose health is otherwise harmed.

Unfortunately, the idea that banning drugs is the best way to protect vulnerable people - especially children - has acquired a strong emotional grip, one that politicians are happy to exploit. For many decades, laws and public policy have flown in the face of [the evidence](#). Far from protecting us, this approach has made the world a much more dangerous place than it need be.

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Legal Right

Wed Sep 09 18:15:40 BST 2009 by [Pepino](#)

As a former drug user myself I can honestly say that drugs need to be legalized period.

The money spent on enforcing our draconian drug laws can be put to better use on rehab and education.

And after almost kicking the bucket, I presently don't touch a thing so drugs are not for life. That argument just does not fly!

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KudosWed Sep 09 19:15:49 BST 2009 by **billzfantazy**

Well done NS for telling it how it is. Mind you...you don't have to get elected do you?

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Alcohol Is A DrugWed Sep 09 19:32:19 BST 2009 by **MC Malkemus**

The amazing thing is, that alcohol is completely legal, kills more people every year than drugs ever did or ever will (barring drug wars made necessary by making them illegal), and something like marijuana per se is illegal???

Excuse me, but I've never almost been killed by a marijuana user on the road. I've come close multiple times by drunkards.

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Alcohol Is A DrugWed Sep 09 20:48:39 BST 2009 by **Ken**

Mexico has recently decriminalized personal consumption of marijuana (and several other drugs). It should be interesting to see what happens there.

More than likely, the violent drug cartels will continue to operate, since their primary market is most likely the U.S. anyway.

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Alcohol Is A DrugWed Sep 09 21:52:27 BST 2009 by **Liza**

Decriminalising use is a small step in the right direction but creates its own problems and leads to legal absurdities- you can use it but not sell or grow it, where are those drugs supposed to come from? As the Dutch can testify, a country that single-handedly legalises recreational drug use can count on getting overwhelmed by drug tourists and all the problems they generate. At present they consider tightening their laws and closing "coffee-shops", but rather they should insist on a consistent regulation all through Europe. Maybe Portugal has avoided most problems of drug tourism because it is rather isolated geographically speaking. Mexico is sure to receive a wave of "gringo" drug tourists in the near future- unless they are scared off by the narco wars.

Total world-wide legalisation of all aspects of drug use, from production to consumption, is the only answer- enough innocents have died.

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Alcohol Is A DrugThu Sep 10 11:38:15 BST 2009 by **Dagonweb**

As dutch, DAMMIT, we DO emphatically insist that europe harmonizes its narcotics laws on the side of robust legalisation. If you legalize (or integrate into medical care) the use of a wide range of substances, ranging from cannabis to heroin, WHAMMO day two the use of a whole range of near-toxic substances will evaporate.

Meth for starters, even though meth use in Europe is minimal.

But what do you know - all sorts of conservatives and religionists have strong motive to want to rudely interfere in

other people's lives and keep narcotics and mind altering substances illegal. I wonder, what is their MOTIVE for doing this?

Are they receiving kickbacks?

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Alcohol Is A Drug

Thu Sep 10 01:03:23 BST 2009 by **Mort**

Indeed, that is infact the idea, nobody cares about the 'crime' that is being a low level user, thus in a single wave they have freed up huge amounts of police time to deal with the real a#####s.

i cant help but agree that total legalization is the best way to undercut the crime networks, if i can just go to my local 24 hour garage and buy a pack of spliffs for about the same price as a pack of cigarettes, then all that crime money just vanishes from the system.....

isnt it amazing how dense our leaders are

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