

Five Years Ago Discussing Reform of Drug Policy Was Taboo. Now Ending the Drug War Is Popular!

by Kevin B. Zeese



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Over the past two years voters in seven states and the District of Columbia passed initiatives favoring medical marijuana or decriminalization of marijuana generally and treating drug offenses as a health issue rather than a law enforcement issue. Recently, a wide array of groups, including the NAACP, Volunteers of America, YWCA, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church and the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition, have called for a new approach to drug control.

There are at least three good reasons for reevaluation of our current approaches:

Does Not Protect American Youth

Last year almost 10 percent of America's children between the ages of 12 and 17 used illegal drugs. That's nearly twice the 1992 percentage. Before graduating from high school, half will try an illegal drug.

Throughout the last two decades approximately 90 percent of high school students have said illegal drugs are easy for them to get-easier than beer.

Advocates for the current policy claim drug use has decreased since 1978. These claims are highly doubtful. 1) These figures come from a voluntary survey conducted by the federal government. Do we think people will be as honest about

their drug use in the repressive 90s as they would have been in the more permissive 70s? 2) Certain key populations, among them prisoners, are not included in the survey. 3) Even according to this survey, last year, nearly 14 million Americans used illegal drugs. That's an increase of over 1.5 million drug users since the beginning of the Clinton Administration. 4) The health and social problems associated with drugs have worsened since 1978-overdose deaths and mentions of drugs in hospital emergency rooms are at record highs, while the spread of disease such as AIDS and hepatitis-C is rampant. These serious health problems are largely the result of prohibition which makes it impossible to know the purity of illegal drugs, discourages people from seeking prompt medical treatment for fear of incarceration, and often prohibits the sale of sterile syringes thereby spreading disease.

Americans recognize the drug war is not working: gangs and cartels are getting richer, adolescents have easy access to drugs, overdose deaths are at record highs. We are spending too much on a policy that doesn't work.

High Costs Without Results

At the Federal level the drug control budget has increased from \$9 billion to \$18 billion in less than a decade. Since Reagan-era nearly \$200 billion has been spent on the drug war by the federal government. Nationally we spend approximately \$50 billion annually on drug control.

Drugs are more potent and less expensive

despite record arrests and incarceration of drug offenders. Since 1991, the price of pure heroin has dropped from over \$3,000 per gram to \$1,000 per gram, cocaine prices have dropped from \$275 per gram to \$94 per gram.

The economics of drug prohibition are undermining the economies and democratic institutions in foreign countries. The drug market is a \$400 billion per year industry, equaling 8% of the world's trade according to the United Nations. The US Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates that \$57 billion is spent annually on drugs in the US alone. Drug profits fuel insurgency movements, corrupt public officials and undermine the world's economy because prohibition turns plants into products more valuable than gold.

Cruel and Discriminatory Practices

Arrest and incarceration rates are at record highs. Over 1.5 million people are arrested each year for drug offenses, two-thirds for mere possession according to the FBI. Nationally, 1.8 million Americans are behind bars; 400,000 are incarcerated for drug offenses.

Only 11% of the nation's drug users are black; however, blacks constitute almost 37% of those arrested for drug violations, over 42% of those in federal prisons for drug violations, and almost 60% of those in state prisons for drug felonies.

What Can We Do?

We can be more effective if we are pragmatic, base our policy choices on the facts and are not afraid to face-up to the failure of current policy. Citizens need to get informed, get active and help end a very expensive and destructive policy. Future columns will discuss alternatives to the drug war. To learn more now, please visit www.csdp.org for alternative approaches, accurate information and connections to reform-minded organizations. And let us know how you or your organization can help spread the reform message.

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