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

by Kevin B. Zeese

Common Sense for Drug Policy, Kevin B. Zeese, President

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 revaluation of our current approaches:

**High Costs Without Results**

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.

**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.

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 revaluation of our current approaches:

1. **At the Federal level**, the drug control budget has increased from $9 billion to $18 billion in less than a decade. Since the 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.

2. **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.

3. **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.

4. **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.

5. **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.

6. **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.

7. **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.