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# 5 Surprising Consequences of the War on Drugs

By [Norm Stamper](#) <sup>[1]</sup> / [AlterNet](#) <sup>[2]</sup>  
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We do not hear much about the war on drugs from Republicans and Democrats. This, despite the calamitous, irrefutable harms caused by U.S. drug policy: the trillion dollars squandered <sup>[3]</sup> trying to win a nonsensical, unwinnable war; the tens of millions of Americans arrested <sup>[4]</sup> for nonviolent drug offenses over the past 40 years; the obscene death count in Mexico, the casualties on our own home soil.

That the drug war will get little or no play in the parties' platforms is a product of fear and political calculation. What both Democrats and Republicans fail to grasp is just how far behind public opinion they lag, especially on marijuana issues. Recent polls show an overwhelming majority (70 percent <sup>[5]</sup>) of Americans favoring the legalization of medical marijuana, and a solid majority (50-56 percent <sup>[6]</sup>) in support of regulated marijuana for recreational purposes. (The figures are much higher in the west, and among young, Democratic and independent voters, with conservatives showing growing support as well.)

Perhaps we can get the attention of the parties by focusing on five less obvious yet comparably dreadful byproducts of the drug war, conditions that millions of Americans are forced to live with daily.

**1. Depressed property values and diminished quality of life.** Not all of the physical deterioration in blighted communities can be traced to joblessness, underwater mortgages, vacant and repossessed homes. In fact, open-air drug markets, hand-to-hand street dealing, drug-related drive-by shootings and home invasion robberies have long afflicted inner city (and, increasingly, rural) neighborhoods.

I've worked in such neighborhoods, talked to numerous residents who've struggled against this reality, day after day, year after year. I've seen the proliferation of "For Sale" signs as families try to unload deeply depreciated homes in the futile hope of moving to a safer community. Were it not for drug trafficking, most of these neighborhoods would have an entirely different, much more secure and optimistic feel to them.

**2. Strained community-police relations.** Those arrested for nonviolent drug offenses are overwhelmingly young, poor, black or brown -- traditional prey for abusive cops. Reconciliation

between police officers and minorities is possible; working together to build safer, healthier communities is achievable. But not so long as local cops embody the values and carry out the duties of frontline warriors in the feds' War on Drugs.

**3. Increased police militarization.** Enemies are pretty much essential to a war, and enemy combatants in the drug war are easy to spot (see above). 9/11 only added, albeit significantly, to a preexisting condition of police militarization. Thanks to the drug war, American cops have become more soldier-like in appearance, armament and tactics. This paramilitary mentality has enlarged the "us-them" gap between a community's police officers and its citizens. While certainly not acceptable, it's not hard to understand how cops come to dehumanize "targets" in drug busts. (Or an Occupy protest, for that matter.)

A five a.m. drug raid, replete with shouting, uniformed intruders and flashbang grenades, is not something people will ever forget -- especially if shots are fired, and family members or pets are struck. The tactics of the drug war are inherently militaristic, inherently violent.

(The drug war also explains other abuses we see in modern policing: illegal stop and frisk [7] practices; other violations of the Fourth Amendment [which bars unlawful searches and seizures]; character-challenged cops planting dope or guns or converting seized drugs to their own use.)

We need to come to terms with the fact that, for millions of Americans, community cops function more as an entitled, occupying force than a public safety resource.

**4. Damage to the economy.** Suffice to say, throwing upwards of 70 billion dollars annually [8] at the "drug problem" (making matters worse, not better) takes a huge chunk out of both national and local treasuries. Money that could be put to much better use in prevention and treatment programs. And in attacking predatory crime like burglaries, robberies, auto thefts, car prowls, domestic violence, child abuse, rape and other sexual assaults -- crimes that frighten us, that cause us to change the way we live.

**5. Disrespect for the rule of law, and for government.** "Nothing," wrote [9] Albert Einstein, "is more destructive of respect for the government and the law of the land than passing laws which cannot be enforced." If U.S. drug laws were truly enforceable, there'd be no drug war.

But when, for example, over 100 million Americans have acknowledged using [10] marijuana, when the president and at least two of his predecessors, along with [11] the mayor of New York City and uncountable other notables in public life are known to have used pot and/or other drugs you have a clear picture of the unenforceability of our drug laws. Not to mention the hypocrisy of our leaders. Imagine if Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Michael Bloomberg had been busted for their "youthful indiscretions," had earned the label, "convicted drug offender." We wouldn't know their names today.

When the nation's drug czar informs us [12], in all his medical wisdom, that cannabis has no established medicinal value, or when he defends pot's classification as a "Schedule I" drug [13], alongside heroin, the legitimacy and credibility of governance suffers. Likewise, when congress fails to entertain [14] legislation that would transfer drug control from the criminal justice to the public health system. Where it so clearly belongs.

If our political parties are too dense or too timid to end the drug war, the states will have to do the job.

Which is precisely how alcohol prohibition was defeated. Starting with New York and quickly picking up steam in other parts of the country, the people repealed the 13-year ban on alcohol and replaced it with sensible, regulated legalization.

This November, voter initiatives in Washington, Colorado, and Oregon will, if passed, put these three states <sup>[15]</sup> on a collision course with the federal government.

Freedom-loving, responsible Americans ought to welcome that collision. It's long overdue.

*This post is part of the HuffPost Shadow Conventions 2012, a series spotlighting three issues that are not being discussed at the national GOP and Democratic conventions: The Drug War, Poverty in America, and Money in Politics.*

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[3] <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1887488,00.html>

[4] <http://www.drugpolicy.org/news/2012/02/sen-rand-paul-r-ky-blocks-draconian-drug-war-legislation-us>

[5] <http://www.gallup.com/poll/150149/record-high-americans-favor-legalizing-marijuana.aspx>

[6] <http://healthland.time.com/2012/06/14/10-reasons-to-revisit-marijuana-policy-now/#americans-increasingly-favor-reform>

[7] <http://www.nyclu.org/issues/racial-justice/stop-and-frisk-practices>

[8] [http://www.salem-news.com/articles/may242008/pot\\_culture\\_5-24-08.php](http://www.salem-news.com/articles/may242008/pot_culture_5-24-08.php)

[9] <http://bit.ly/NvANER>

[10] <http://norml.org/faq>

[11] [http://powerwall.msnbc.msn.com/politics/politicians-and-marijuana-a-love-story-8860.gallery#!wallState=0\\_\\_%2Fpolitics%2Fpoliticians-and-marijuana-a-love-story-8860.gallery%3FphotoId%3D33548](http://powerwall.msnbc.msn.com/politics/politicians-and-marijuana-a-love-story-8860.gallery#!wallState=0__%2Fpolitics%2Fpoliticians-and-marijuana-a-love-story-8860.gallery%3FphotoId%3D33548)

[12] <http://videocafe.crooksandliars.com/cspanjunkie/smoked-marijuana-has-no-medicinal-valu>

[13] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/01/medical-marijuana-rescheduling-case\\_n\\_1728596.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/01/medical-marijuana-rescheduling-case_n_1728596.html)

[14] [http://www.justice.gov/dea/marijuana\\_position.pdf](http://www.justice.gov/dea/marijuana_position.pdf)

[15] [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/25/marijuana-legalization-washington-colorado\\_n\\_1830272.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/25/marijuana-legalization-washington-colorado_n_1830272.html)

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