

Connecting the Dots: 10 Disastrous Consequences of the Drug War

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The war on drugs is America's longest war. It has been 40-plus years since Nixon launched our modern "war on drugs" and yet drugs are as plentiful as ever. While the idea we can have a "drug free society" is laughable, the disastrous consequences of our drug war are dead serious. While it might not be obvious, the war on drugs touches and destroys so many of the issues we care about and values we hold. Below are ten collateral consequences of the drug war and reasons we need to find an exit strategy from this unwinnable war.

Racial Injustice:

The war on drugs is built on racial injustice. Despite roughly equal rates of drug use and sales, African-American men are arrested at 13 times the rate of white men on drug charges in the U.S. -- with rates up to 57 times in some states. African Americans and Latinos together make up 29 percent of the total U.S. population, but more than 75 percent of drug law violators in state and federal prisons.

Denied Access to Education, Housing and Benefits:

Passed by Congress in 1998, the Higher Education Act delays or denies federal financial aid to anyone ever convicted of a felony or misdemeanor drug offense - including marijuana possession. A drug offense will also get you and your whole family kicked out of public housing. 32 states ban anyone convicted of a drug felony from collecting food stamps.

Wasted Taxpayer Dollars:

U.S. federal, state, and local governments now spend \$50 billion per year trying to make America "drug free." State prison budgets top spending on public colleges and universities. The prison industrial complex is ever more powerful. Nevertheless, heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine and other illicit drugs are cheaper, purer, and easier to get than ever before.

Unsafe Neighborhoods:

Most "drug-related" violence stems not from drug use, but from drug prohibition. That was true in Chicago under alcohol kingpin Al Capone and it is true now. The mass killings in Mexico and in many U.S. cities are not from marijuana or other drug use, but because the plants are worth more than gold and people are willing to kill each other over the profits to be made.

Shredded Constitutional Rights:

Armed with paramilitary gear, police break into homes unannounced, terrorizing innocent and guilty alike. Prosecutors seize private property without due process. Citizens convicted of felony offenses lose their right to vote, in some states for life. More and more Americans are subject to urine tests without cause. And the list goes on.

Bloodbath in Latin America:

U.S. drug policies in Latin America have failed to reduce the supply of illicit drugs. Instead they have led to a bloodbath with more than 60,000 people killed in prohibition violence since 2006 in Mexico

alone. Our policy and strategies have empowered organized criminals, corrupted governments, stimulated violence, assaulted the environment and created tens of thousands of refugees.

Compromising Teenagers' Safety:

The defenders of the failed war on drugs say that we can't discuss alternatives to prohibition because it would "send the wrong message to the kids." Ironically, the drug war is a complete failure when it comes to keeping young people from using drugs. Despite decades of DARE programs with the simplistic "Just Say No" message, 50 percent of teenagers will try marijuana before they graduate and 75 percent will drink alcohol. Young people also feel the brunt of marijuana enforcement and make up the majority of arrests. Arresting young people will often cause more damage than drug use itself. Teenagers need honest drug education to help them make responsible decisions. Safety should be the number one priority.

Drug Treatment:

Despite the government's lip service to the need for treatment, most of the drug war budget still goes to criminal justice and military agencies. The majority of those who need treatment can't get it. And for many, the only way to get treatment is to get arrested. We should never put people in a cage because they have a drug problem, and we should make treatment available to all who want it.

Public Health:

Unsterile syringe sharing is associated with 100,000s of HIV/AIDS infections in the U.S. among injection drug users, their sex partners and children. Yet state paraphernalia and prescription laws limit access to sterile syringes in pharmacies, and the U.S. government stands alone among western industrialized nations in refusing to fund needle exchange.

Destroyed Families:

The number of people behind the bars on a drug charge in the U.S. has ballooned from 50,000 in 1980 to more than half-a-million today. That's more than all of Western Europe (with a bigger population) incarcerates for everything. Millions of people in the U.S. now have a father, mother, brother, sister, son or daughter behind bars on a drug charge.

Momentum Builds to End Drug War:

The war on drugs is really a war on people. It is hard to imagine an issue that has caused so much damage to so many people on so many fronts. Thankfully momentum is building in the this country and abroad toward a more rational drug policy based on science, compassion, health and human rights. States like Colorado and Washington just dealt a blow to marijuana prohibition by legalizing marijuana. World leaders, including multiple presidents in Latin America are calling for open debate on alternatives to drug prohibition. Many countries in Europe have implemented public health strategies like "safe injection facilities" and prescribing medical heroin to reduce HIV/AIDS and overdose deaths. Both red and blue states are reducing their prison populations by offering alternatives to jail for low-level drug offenses.

Everyone has a reason to oppose and be outraged by the failed drug war. We need to step up our efforts, grow our numbers, and continue to win hearts and minds because the casualties from the war continue to grow every day. And the war on drugs is not going to end itself.

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