

Decriminalising drugs

Should we decriminalise drugs? Is that a horrifying idea? A new publication *After the War on Drugs: Blueprint for Regulation* has the courage to pose the question.

The paper argues that prohibition is not only not working but that it may be the problem. People become addicted to drugs such as heroin when it is prescribed for medical reasons or they start when they are too young or impressionable to be able to judge the consequences. Once hooked it's an expensive habit but far stronger than anything else, so if it's hard to get then addicts will devote their lives to their daily supply. Prohibition only sends them underground, and women into prostitution as the only way to get that kind of money.

Methadone addicts can get their supplies for \$5 a day from a chemist and so can establish a relatively normal life as a base to resolve their problems. Community worker Chris Middendorp says that current laws don't stop drug use but do turn the users into criminals and create a massive black market, while the drug problem steadily increases.

Richard Nixon announced the "war on drugs" 40 years ago and in 1988 the US Congress declared the US would be drug-free by 1995. Billions of dollars later, drugs are a central fact of American life. Obama has now publicly declared the war on drugs an "utter failure".

In 2001 Portugal decriminalised all drugs and drug use there was reduced. In 1994 free heroin was made available to addicts in Switzerland and prostitution, homelessness and burglary have all fallen. Alienation increases problems. Drug users need the opposite: community and medical support.

Why have drugs been made illegal? Is it because they are harmful? Alcohol and cigarettes are probably more so, especially during Prohibition in the US, when users turned to moonshine and as drug users turn now to cheaply manufactured drugs. Once they're illegal, there's no way to avoid cheap toxic substitutes and additives.

The strongest proponents of keeping drugs illegal are the international criminal organisations who rake in billions from one of the most profitable businesses in the world. They're the ones who have the most to lose from legalising, as not only their profits but their entire enterprises would disappear. In addition the countless billions gained by criminals is then channelled into undermining the legal system and building other criminal enterprises.

The greatest beneficiaries of legalising, besides the addicts, would be governments and the environment. Governments incur massive costs trying to stop the criminals, destroy the crops and address the problems caused by the criminalised addicts, and the chemicals sprayed into the environment have a devastating impact, not only on the natural environment but also on crops.

Perhaps our obsession with making drugs illegal is the greatest drug of all. We're addicted to it not because it's healthy but because it's always been that way.

We need to pull ourselves together and start a major withdrawal program. A complete turnaround is needed to help those in need and make society safe again.

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