Can We Win the War on Drugs by Ending the Fight?

Contributed by Adam Barney
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Adam Barney's report from the front lines of drug rehabilitation, Florida Beach Rehab, takes a national policy view of main aspects of substance abuse. Culture Change's editorial commentary on healing and on hemp follows this post. - ed.

Uruguay made a groundbreaking legislative change in 2013 when the nation legalized the growth, sale, and consumption of marijuana all at once. That monumental change appears to have accelerated the legalization of the plant across parts of the U.S., which has subsequently reduced much of the stigma attached to marijuana.

U.S. Marijuana Legalization

In 2012, Colorado became the first U.S. state to legalize marijuana. There are now expectations that weed dealers will become defunct as consumers can now purchase honestly and for lower prices. In essence, this is a test to determine the outcome of regulating drugs with the purpose of decriminalizing their status – even though that was never the intention.

Joining Colorado’s experiment in 2014 is Washington State, which will add further credence to the Rocky Mountain Empire. Next in line could be Arkansas, California, and Oregon, plus a couple of others. However, those states are first making small steps, such as making it legal for possession or medical use.

Colorado Leading the Way

In Colorado, the typical cost for an ounce of legal marijuana is $400. But if you are one of the thousands of U.S. citizens that required marijuana for medical purposes, then you can obtain your ounce for about half the going rate at $200. Without medical grounds for a discount, $400 isn’t exactly a bargain basement price. But then again, the state is trying to earn taxable revenue here.

With marijuana now legalized, there is now room for legal marijuana suppliers to set up legitimate businesses. To get state approval, though, vendors will have to demonstrate that they have control at every level of their supply chain. The illegal status in the states surrounding Colorado means that tight control will have to be maintained over legal vendors.

Origins of the War on Drugs

The above measures taken by U.S. states are the first signs of real change for how North America views drugs. Ever since 1971, when then U.S. president Richard Nixon declared drug abuse to be “public enemy number one,” the nation has been all too familiar with the War on Drugs. And they should be, because the “war” demands billions of dollars annually from the government.

When you look at the returns of those billions of dollars over the past four decades, the results have delivered little. Sure there have been covert operations made against South American cartels and some criminals facing justice in the U.S., but ultimately there has been no lasting impact – not unless you count ineffectiveness.

The fact of the matter is that the War on Drugs has long been lost, and that's the official opinion of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, as shared in June 2011. You have to applaud the Obama administration in this regard because his 2009 director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy specifically stated that the term "War on Drugs" was counterproductive.

Former U.S. president Jimmy Carter offered an alarming summary of the War on Drugs to the New York Times, in which he explained that approximately 500,000 people had been incarcerated within the country by the time he vacated office in 1980. The number of people incarcerated in connection to the war had exploded past 2.3 million by the beginning of 2010. Convinced that current legal penalties are doing more harm than good, Carter is a firm advocate of decriminalizing drugs.

In contrast to the beliefs of Carter, the Barack Obama administration requested $25.6 billion in federal funding in 2013 to spend on the war. To date, more than $1 trillion has been spent on a war that is only slipping further from the grasp of the U.S. government. U.S. social programs have now been deprived of additional funding for more than 40 years. Meanwhile, one American is arrested every 42 seconds for marijuana, and marijuana arrests account for more than half the drug arrests in the United States, most of whom are minorities.

Changing the Public Perception

The history of the War of Drugs has taught us that the previous actions have literally done nothing to the win the war, and that those failures have spawned the legalization efforts of marijuana to take control from the hands of the traffickers and bring the revenue streams to where the money might actually benefit society. However, change is not going to come easily.

Drug specialists like Florida Beach Rehab have helped hundreds of drug abusers to take back their lives and make a new start. And you can rest assured that these victims were not lured into their addictions by the "weed is a gateway drug" mumbo-jumbo perpetuated by the ill-informed swatches of society who never take the time to develop a rational opinion.

The solution to ending the war is to take away control from the criminals and to continue to convince the general public that the strategy is an effective course of action. And based on statistics from PewResearch, this is a war of hearts and minds that is being won. As of 2013, 52% of Americans were in favor of marijuana legalization and 45% were against.

Taking things a step further, how can the government respond to drugs like cocaine, heroin, meth, and ecstasy? After all, those are the drugs that develop the most conflict among cartels, and it would take a lot of convincing to legalize any of those drugs. But one thing is for certain: war has failed.

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Culture Change would add that marijuana legalization also makes legal beneficial industrial hemp. Hemp -- very minimal drug-content marijuana -- was central to commerce and crafts in North America for a couple of centuries before being criminalized (which benefited major competing industrial interests). In regard to health, refraining from drug abuse both of recreational/illegal and legal/medical is essential for good health. Detoxification and rehabilitation from an unsustainable lifestyle are crucial, whereas mere treatment of symptoms gets us nowhere as to causes. The War on Drugs may have been fought by some in the name of healing, but results were otherwise. Profits for the huge prison industrial complex have little to do with a healthy society. Medical insurance is to some synonymous with health, but pharmaceuticals prescribed and over-the-counter can be toxic and a way to try to maintain a stressful lifestyle. They are of concern to Culture Change partly because these substances are primarily made from fossil fuels. - ed.