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Donald Roth

Dordt College, donald.roth@dordt.edu

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5 Myths and Misconceptions About the War on Drugs

Abstract

"With the War on Drugs turning 45 this year, here are some public misconceptions about that policy that I think warrant more careful reflection on what our path forward should be."

Posting about drug abuse in America from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/5-myths-and-misconceptions-about-the-war-on-drugs/>

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Comments

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5 Myths and Misconceptions About the War on Drugs

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Donald Roth

I can remember sitting through D.A.R.E. education in 5th grade, using a piece of chalk to represent a marijuana cigarette and practicing what we would do if a friend offered us a joint. We were taught to “Just say No,” and there was a heavy implication that just one interaction with drugs could leave us hooked for life. These expectations were challenged a bit when I was actually offered my first joint while drafting a fantasy football team with a group of friends from Georgetown Law School. As I’m sure my mom would be relieved to hear, I still declined the offer, but the experience did highlight for me that our expectations and stereotypes around drugs often vary from reality. Here was a group of highly intelligent, highly motivated individuals (pun intended) who nonetheless used marijuana, and occasionally, other drugs, without bursting into violence or turning into washed up dropouts.

The temptation then, would be for me to react against my earlier experience and join the majority of Americans (A Rasmussen Reports [poll](#) puts the number at 82%.) who believe the War on Drugs is a failure. While I hardly think the policy has been an unmitigated success, I believe the truth, as is so often the case, is more complicated than the public narrative. While our national attitudes toward a proper response are shifting, people remain convinced that drug abuse is a serious national problem. ([Polling](#) by Pew Research Center says 87% of people consider drug abuse to be either a “serious problem” or a “crisis.”) With the War on Drugs turning 45 this year, here are some public misconceptions about that policy that I think warrant more careful reflection on what our path forward should be.

Myth 1: The U.S. is behind the rest of the world in its drug policy.

Although this June marks the 45th anniversary of President Nixon’s famous [address](#) calling for a “new, all-out offensive” against drug abuse as “America’s public enemy number one,” the international effort to curb recreational drug use actually dates back to March 30, 1961, with the signing of the [United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs](#). (Other efforts, particularly combatting things like opium use, date back even further.) While many nations have been actively reconsidering their approach to drug enforcement strategies, the United States is not an outlier in its approach, and there is [very much an international discussion](#) still on-going about what path to take.

Myth 2: The War on Drugs has overfilled American prisons.

This is really more of an oversimplification than a myth. In March 2016, Vox put together a really [valuable collection](#) of charts that illustrate the significant challenges that the United States faces with regard to mass incarceration. Among these charts is a nice visual summary of a Bureau of Justice Statistics [report](#) totaling up the U.S. prison population. While most federal prisoners are indeed incarcerated for drug offenses (about 50%), federal prisoners add up to less than 200,000 inmates, compared to the 1.3 million people in state custody. In state prisons, only around 15% are incarcerated on drug offenses, while over 50% are serving time for violent crimes. As the Marshall Project [brilliantly illustrates](#) via an adjustable graph, significantly cutting the prison population involves far more than releasing everyone convicted of drug offenses.

At the same time, enforcement efforts have had a vastly disproportionate effect on [minority communities](#), particularly African Americans. With the current crisis of confidence in policing radiating out from minority communities in recent years, this significant factor cannot be overlooked.

Myth 3: Legalizing drugs will lead to a huge increase in their use.

This is a commonly-cited fear by those opposed to any relaxing of drug laws, and, just as frequently, the lack of post-legalization upswing in drug use in states like Colorado (Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper has been [quoted](#) as

saying, “It seems like the people that were smoking before are mainly the people that are smoking now.”) or countries like [Portugal](#) has been cited as a counter-argument. However, both sides may be oversimplifying the situation. It’s not surprising that usage would not spike with the relaxing of legal norms, since social norms take much longer to change, and we can see just this effect by looking at the analogous situation of alcohol prohibition. Although modern popular conceptions see alcohol prohibition as a total failure, it massively reduced the per capita consumption of alcohol and alcohol-related diseases, and that effect lingered long into the decades following its repeal, with annual consumption per capita not reaching pre-Prohibition peaks until the 1970s.¹ There are plenty of reasons to suspect that drug use would follow similar patterns, meaning that we may see substantial increases in drug use, but it is likely that the effect will take some time to occur, and that increase is neither inevitable nor irreversible.

Myth 4: Legalizing drugs will solve governmental budgetary challenges.

This myth is less popular these days than it once was, but advocates of ending the War on Drugs [still argue](#) for it as a credible way to help to balance budget deficits. No doubt, the tax revenues that could be raised from taxing the legal sale of drugs like marijuana are substantial, and the government does spend billions of dollars seeking to enforce current policies, but these arguments are victims of the stupidly huge numbers that are involved in the federal budgetary process. Colorado, although [initially](#) reaping far less than the projected \$70 million in tax revenue, is facing a [projected deficit](#) of around three times that amount. At the same time, while the highest estimates charge the federal government with spending [more than \\$50 billion](#) on the War on Drugs, that still makes up only a little over 1% of the staggering \$3.8 trillion federal budget. Of course, few are calling for all enforcement spending to go away, so total savings quickly become miniscule in terms of overall government spending. Similarly, if asked whether drug enforcement is important enough to spend 1% of our budget on, I suspect polling results would be significantly different than if people are asked whether to spend \$50 billion on the same initiatives.

Myth 5: Legalization will end the War on Drugs.

This is where it becomes important to define our terms. Some people advocate legalization of solely medicinal marijuana; others call for it to be recreationally available. Similarly, some advocate the decriminalization of possessing small amounts of harder drugs, usually imposing something equivalent to a traffic citation for possession, but few are advocating for the outright legalization of recreational usage of drugs like cocaine or heroin. Even when we talk about legalization, it usually means within a carefully regulated and highly-taxed market, and no one is credibly advocating stocking methamphetamine in the grocery aisle.

If all of these things are true, then this means that legalization will not bring about an end to the black market trafficking of drugs, something Colorado has found to be [all-too true](#) with respect to marijuana. Nearly inevitable disparities in price and availability mean that drug economies will continue to operate even in a post-legalization environment, and, given that relaxed standards in one area usually lead to increased enforcement in others, overall police enforcement activity may not even decrease, as was the case for [Portugal](#) after it decriminalized low-level possession in 2001.

Conclusion

As you can see, the policy issues around the War on Drugs are hardly cut-and-dried. The current approach has some significant drawbacks which strongly suggest a need for reform, but we shouldn’t fall into the trap of thinking that there are easy solutions to the challenges presented. A shift in the balance of punishment versus treatment is desirable for policy reasons, and it seems to be backed by a [strong majority](#) of Americans, but what exactly the new policy landscape will look like is far from certain. In reflecting on the War on Drugs over the past 45 years, it’s important that we not be too hasty to discard what we’ve done before, but that should not dissuade us from seeking a better way. What initiatives or policies do you find particularly exciting in addressing this challenging issue?

Footnotes

1. Blocker, Jack S. [“Did Prohibition Really Work? Alcohol Prohibition as a Public Health Innovation.”](#) American Journal of Public Health 96.2 (2006): 233–243.PMC. Web. 31 May 2016. ↩