

# The U.S. Drug Issue

## Not a Lost Cause

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*“The problem [drug addiction] has assumed the dimensions of a national emergency...If we cannot destroy the drug menace in America, then it will surely in time destroy us. I am not prepared to accept this alternative.”*

Richard Nixon, 1971

*“As Americans, we cannot allow this to continue. It is time to liberate our communities from this scourge of drug addiction. [It has] Never been this way. We can be the generation that ends the opioid epidemic. We can do it.”*

Donald Trump, 2017

**M**ore Americans die from the misuse of opioids than from war, traffic accidents, or gun violence every year. In 2016, 175 Americans died from a drug overdose every day. The U.S. National Security Strategy describes this security issue as a threat that undermines social order through violent crimes and the deaths of thousands of Americans each year. Until now, U.S. drug policies have focused on attacking drug dealers, con-

sumers, and drug production and trafficking with the help of U.S. partners. However, they have not effectively mitigated this threat and have produced unexpected outcomes with worrisome economic and social consequences. Thus, this article proposes changing U.S. drug policies to focus on managing, instead of defeating, the drug scourge.

Current U.S. policies against drugs are not new and have strongly focused on drug dealers and consumers. Nevertheless, they have produced unexpected outcomes. The U.S. antidrug enforcement began more than 140 years ago with the opium prohibition. Later, U.S. policies attacked cocaine in 1914 and marijuana in 1937. Since then, stronger policies were issued by the federal government, especially during the Nixon and Reagan Administrations, to control this complex and endless problem. The logic behind those policies was to “attack the drug market” and to “punish the drug consumer.” Lawmakers believed that making the drug scarcer and costlier would make drugs unaffordable to Americans, and that the U.S. crackdown against consumers would deter Americans’ use of drugs. However, these policies failed to achieve their goals. The price of heroin dropped by 75% between 1981 and 2012, and half of all federal prisons were filled with drug offenders. The average rate of heroin use increased from 2.4 per 1,000 men and 0.8 per 1,000 women to 4.3 per 1,000 men and 2.0 per 1,000 women between 2002 and 2015. Drugs became more affordable, and drug consumers were not deterred. Despite this, the American government recently called for stronger policies to defeat drug smugglers. President Donald Trump stated on March 19, 2018: “If we don’t get tough on the drug dealers, we are wasting our time...And that toughness includes the death penalty.” Time will tell if that controversial measure will be approved and if it will defeat drug dealers.

These policies have not only been harsh but also inconsistent. Moreover, those tough policies have produced worry some economic and social consequences. The main example of the inconsistency in U.S. policies is related to the regulation and control of marijuana. In 2014, more than half of the states decriminalized marijuana or legalized it for medical or recreational use. Therefore, if an individual uses recreational marijuana, he can be found guilty in one state but innocent in another. Parallel to this policy inconsistency, the strong effort to overcome the drug issue has collaterally affected both the American economy and society. In 2013, total spending for health care, including hepatitis C and HIV care due to drug users sharing syringes, was over \$28 billion. Costs for lost productivity, including absenteeism or decreased job performance, were estimated at about \$20 billion in “not fatal” cases and \$25 billion in fatal cases. Criminal justice-related costs were estimated at \$7.7 billion.

With regards to social impact, the main population affected are the families of imprisoned drug offenders. A study of the National Research Council reveals that “from 1980 to 2000, the number of children with incarcerated fathers increased from about 350,000 to 2.1 million—about 3% of all U.S. children.” Even worse, this incarceration has nuances of racism. In *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander argues that in the drug war the enemy is racially defined. She states that most illegal drug users and dealers are white, but three-fourths of all people imprisoned for drug offenses are black or Latino. Dr. Dan Blaze, researcher and a professor of psychiatry at Duke University argues that black youths are 10 times more likely to be arrested for drug crimes than white ones — even though white youths are more likely to abuse drugs than blacks youths.

Nevertheless, the U.S. has incorporated even more comprehensive policies against drugs. The National Drug Control Strategy 2016 expedited by the Obama Administration aimed “to prevent drug use, reduce the stigma that creates barriers to treatment, create opportunities for sustained recovery, and support law enforcement as they work to reduce the availability of drugs across the Nation.” This strategy mainly used schools, hospitals, and communities to distribute prevention messages via print and electronic media. However, that educational strategy struggles with factors that play a key role shaping American culture: movies and social media. These factors are not accounted for in U.S. policies aiming to reduce the likelihood of drug use. In 2005, a re-

search published in the Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine argues drug use tended to be positively depicted in the movies and thus increases the probability drug use. In the same year, a study from Columbia University found that teenagers who see R-rated movies were six times as likely to try marijuana. With respect to social media, another a study from the same University in 2011 found that about 70% of teens who used social media were twice more likely to consume marijuana. Therefore, this reflects that policies should take social media and movies in consideration, in order to shape American culture against drugs.

Another focus of U.S. policy is deterrence against drug production and trafficking. The U.S. has shown total resolution in this area, but success has been undermined by its partners' serious domestic issues. Most of the cocaine that goes into the U.S. is produced in South America and comes through the Mexican-U.S. border. Hence, the U.S. developed foreign aid and assistance programs such as Plan Colombia and Plan Merida (Mexico). However, cocaine production increased in Central and South America by 25% from 2013 to 2015. Reasons range from the inability of some countries to control their territories, to their inability to offer adequate alternative economic opportunities for their inhabitants. Hence, drug cartels find fertile conditions to produce cocaine and increase their power. One way cartels' power increases is through acquisition of U.S. weapons. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 70% of weapons seized in Mexico come from the U.S. This dangerous exchange of drugs for guns develops a perilous spiral that undermines society and feeds drug cartels. Thus, although U.S. policies implemented with support from other countries help to mitigate the production of drug overseas, their effectiveness depends on its U.S. partners.

Regarding interdiction of drug trafficking, the agreements between the U.S. and Central and South American countries allow sharing of information and using standard procedures to interdict drugs. For instance, the Air Bridge Denial program between the U.S. and Colombia reduced illegal air trafficking from Colombia from 639 illegal flights in 2002 to 8 in 2017. However, drug smugglers shifted their routes. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, in 2016 around 94% of the cocaine produced in Colombia was mainly transported by vessels and rudimentary submarines to Mexico/Central America corridor. Hence, a controversial proposal has gained strength: the wall. President Donald Trump stated in 2017 that "The drugs are pouring in at levels like nobody has ever seen... We'll be able to stop them once the wall is up." In this respect, the Tucson Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol believes that the installation of a wall would halt drugs and guns trafficking. However, this idea is debatable. While the American demand for drugs persists, drug smugglers will seek other ways to deliver drugs whether via drones, submarines, tunnels or the darknet (deep web) among others. Moreover, if the wall was totally effective it would only stop 37% of the drugs that kill Americans. Why? Because most of the drugs causing the opioid epidemic that President Trump referred to was produced in the U.S. by major pharmaceutical companies. In October 2017, a former DEA agent stated the pharmaceutical industry boosted the opioid crisis with the approval of Congress." In December 2017, Bridget G. Brennan, New York Special Narcotics Prosecutor stated "Heroin has for decades been the most commonly used illegal opioid. We didn't develop an opioid epidemic until there was a huge surplus of opioids, which started with pharmaceutical drugs."

The drug scourge is a complex hive with a convergence of drug consumers, drug cartels, guns, incarceration, social media, movies, schools, industry pharmaceuticals, politics, partner countries, and societal values, among others. To date, strong policies and efforts have not effectively mitigated this security issue in the U.S. Hence, the following are recommendations to change the focus of existing U.S. anti-drug policies in order to manage, vs. defeat, this permanent threat to society.

First, U.S. policies should be more focused on prevention, by shaping American culture rather than punishment of drug consumers. According to The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime, for every dollar spent on prevention (shaping culture), at least 10 can be saved in health, social and

crime costs. A key to this effort is a massive and persistent prevention campaign that concentrates on social media and movies. Regulations must be established in order to balance “ethics” and “profit” in those enterprises are essential to shape the American culture against drugs and other issues.

Second, U.S. drug policies should be consistent throughout all of the U.S. For example, all Americans should have clear understanding if marijuana is illegal or not, regardless of the State they live in. Clarifying guidance as to whether recreational marijuana is a threat should enable unity of effort to defeat the real drug issue in every corner of U.S. Additionally, the U.S. should seek new solutions to improve the safety of opioid pharmaceutical production and prescription.

Third, the U.S. should rethink its policy to build a wall on the Mexican border. Analyses show that this measure will be irrelevant while American drug demand persists, as drug cartels supported with modern technology will find other ways to deliver drugs in the U.S. In this case, the use of the wall to stop drug trafficking is as effective as the use of a trench to stop airplanes.

Fourth, the U.S. should continue improving unity of effort with its partners and reinforce policies to reduce the power of drug dealers and cartels. One officer of in the Tucson Border Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol recognized that an improvement in the interoperability with Mexico and other partners would leverage the unity of effort to defeat drug cartels. Besides this, tough laws should continue to be enacted against drug dealers and cartels.

One additional recommendation is that the U.S. should establish stronger gun control measures. The U.S. should eliminate semiautomatic and automatic weapons from the market to avoid drug cartels from acquiring these weapons easily. Consequently, those criminals will have less power to produce and traffic drugs. This does not imply changing the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, just restricting certain types of weapons.

This paper has analyzed the main policies that the U.S. and its partners have used to respond the U.S. drug issue and concludes that these strong policies and tireless efforts have been unable to mitigate the drug scourge. Therefore, this opens the possibility for change in order to win the most protracted war that the U.S has had so far, and that has silently killed thousands of Americans: the war on drugs. □

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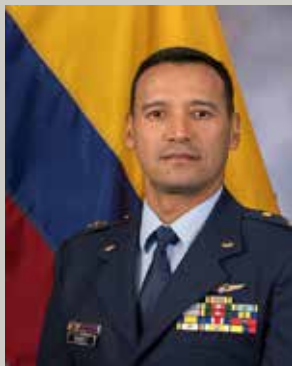
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