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2/18/2019

Why the War on Drugs Failed, and How We Can Fix It.

Addict. Junkie. Failure. Druggie. These words are biting cruelties that drug-dependent Americans have heard for many years, piercing deeper than any needle, destroying the heart just as the substance in question destroys the body. For years, we have been trying to banish drugs from our society, but despite all of our best intentions, we have only managed to harm the people and communities that use them. The crackheads, the meth heads, the potheads, and now the rich kids doped up on opioids, we have failed them all through our futile fight in the war on drugs. To fix this, we must recognize that the war on drugs has failed, and shift our focus from incarceration of addicts to the reconnection and rehabilitation of these people. We have been trying to win the war on drugs by reducing the drug supply, we must instead reduce the demand.

In 1971, amidst [rising rates of drug use](#) among Americans, President Richard Nixon declared an all-out war on drugs, a tragic decision that has resulted in mass incarceration and human misery years after the first shot was fired in this battle. Since then, America has spent billions of dollars on initiatives to fight drug use such as the [Controlled Substances Act](#), which sought to decrease drug use by limiting the supply of drugs. This, combined with the [Anti-Drug Abuse Act](#), which established harsh mandatory minimums for drug offenses were intended to cure America of its drug epidemic, but they only exasperated the problem. The programs were not only damaging, but also wasteful. Currently, with a budget of 30 million dollars, the US Drug enforcement agency has a less than one percent efficiency rate for stopping the flow of drugs into and out of America.

When people are incarcerated for drug use, it does little to solve the issue, often times making them more likely to commit other crimes, [as 77% of felons are re-arrested within five years of release](#). Time in prison makes drug users more likely to commit other crimes, or keep using drugs upon release, because their vocational options are severely limited by a felony record, they are influenced by other, more serious criminals while incarcerated, and societal disadvantages against them make it hard for them to maintain a dignified life. A staggering number of people are in prison for the use of illicit substances, [currently 1 in 5 American prisoners](#) are serving jail time for nonviolent, drug-related crime, with 1.64 million people arrested for drug violations in 2010. Even after the counterefforts of the war on drugs, the use of illicit substances is still prominent in America, [with Heroin and Marijuana use rates doubling in the past decade](#). With these stark numbers, it is crucial that we ask ourselves, truly, is all of this worth it?

This bleak picture of the failed drug war being painted, what can we do about it? How can we reverse the campaign's negative impact, while still preventing large-scale drug use? Proponents of drug war policies favoring incarceration argue that jail time will scare many people away from addiction, hoping that the threat of prison is a great enough incentive to prevent people from using drugs. While heavy sentences may prevent some from drug use, [it destroys the lives of those who do abuse drugs](#) without meaningfully decreasing rates of substance abuse. Even though drugs are illegal, many people become introduced to them through legal alcohol, and parties, and history has already shown us how unsuccessful banning these things has been. It has been shown time and time again that we cannot end drug use by restricting the supply, as that only drives up demand, which incentivizes organizations to

capitalize on it, so we must reduce demand to end this issue. We can do this by changing the way we see addiction, and reforming how our society treats drug addicts.

Before focusing on the solution, it is helpful to better know the problem, and we can examine the war on drugs better by the American attempt to end use of a different substance—alcohol. [Though people initially drank less, by the end of prohibition alcohol usage rates were rising to be almost as high as they were before prohibition](#) During prohibition, alcohol in America was banned, and as a result, bootlegging operations saw great monetary benefit, selling high-potency substances, similar to the cartels that make millions by selling drugs. This allowed hard liquor to rise in popularity, because people still pursued alcohol. Drugs are the same way. The more potent drugs are, being made with as little material and resource possible, the more they will sell for. This is part of the reason the rate of overdoses is increasing, is because the potency of these drugs becomes so high through this [balloon effect](#). Even when we try to wipe them out by reducing the supply or the ability to make them, as was the case with [crystal meth in America](#), we merely drive up the demand for the drug, incentivizing other, smaller parties to step in and reap the benefits. In both cases, people continued to use the substance after its ban, and its potency increased. This shows why the banning and incarceration championed by the war on drugs is simply ineffective at preventing addiction, because restricting supply only increases demand, and incarceration only makes people more likely to fall into a cycle of drug abuse.

In Johann Hari's breakthrough novel, [Chasing the Scream: The First and Final Days of the War on Drugs](#), he states, "The opposite of addiction isn't sobriety. It's connection.", which embodies how we need to face drug addiction in our society. In his book, Hari supports rehabilitating drug addicts by helping them to get back on their feet, providing them housing options and job opportunities as they pursue recovery, instead of dropping them in to a prison

cell and hoping they'll cure themselves through societal isolation. When people become addicted to drugs, they break their connection with society, and we can only win them back by helping them to reestablish their connection, [treating addiction as a health issue rather than a crime](#).

Our legal system has utterly failed to address drug addiction in America, ruining the lives of millions through years of incarceration, but hope is on the horizon, as more innovative treatments are dreamt, and we come to recognize addiction as a disease rather than a sin, we come closer to achieving a world cleaned of drug addiction.

Mentor Articles

Mentor Text 1— [This autism dad has a warning for anti-vaxxers](#)

I chose this article because, like the war on drugs, it is an extremely controversial public health issue. Something I liked about this article is that Belluz relied very heavily on numerical data to get her point across. Because vaccines have become such an area of controversy, often times peoples' arguments are not taken seriously if it is solely opinion-based, but Belluz frequently uses reliable data, which makes her argument not only seem well researched, but also very reliable. I incorporated this into my paper by intentionally making most of my sources based in data, so that it is verifiably sound.

Mentor Text 2—[Nutrition research is deeply biased by food companies. A new book explains why.](#)

I chose this article, like the last, because I think it focuses largely on cause and effect on issues pertaining to matters of public health, in this case fitness. In this article, Belluz asks a lot of questions of her reader, calling them to consider the true nature of their diets. I incorporated something similar in this editorial, near the end, asking the reader just how America should tackle its drug problem. Belluz was using her questions to get her audience to consider more closely their prior knowledge on the topic, and face it with more healthy skepticism, and I was encouraging something very similar when I asked the reader how we should address this drug war, compelling him or her to reexamine the issue.