

By DR. BOB PAINTER

Taking the control of Hartford's \$42 million drug market from criminals and placing it in the hands of citizens who will be responsible for regulating it seems a strikingly sensible strategy.

Unless we try a new approach that includes regulating and taxing marijuana, emphasizing harm reduction measures for problem drug users and getting them into treatment rather than jail, the trade in illegal drugs will continue to ravage our Capital. Although the serious crime rate is lower, homicides (directly related to the drug trade) are up. While large employers, cultural institutions and excellent restaurants attract many visitors to Hartford daily, hundreds more stay away for fear of violence.

New downtown housing has attracted many young professionals and empty nesters to the city. Many potential residents, however, stay away, inhibiting needed downtown retail development. The fear of crime, spawned mostly by the illegal drug market, is considered by experts to be the single greatest barrier to economic development in our cities.

In my research at Central Connecticut State University, I have attempted to quantify the cost of drug enforcement and to gather information concerning drug use from federal, state and city statistics. This kind of specific data about Hartford is not readily available and I was conservative in my calculations.

To determine how much money is exchanged to purchase drugs in Hartford, for example, I used data from the Office of National Drug Control Policy, the U. S. Census Bureau and my academic research. The calculations show illegal drug purchases in Hartford total a startling \$42 million annually. This would be a good gross income for a successful Walmart. Unlike Walmart, this is an untaxed criminal enterprise.

Although 88 percent of Connecticut's illegal drug overdoses occur in the suburbs, Hartford is the regional source for illegal drug purchases. It is notable that 39 percent of those arrested in Hartford for drug offenses are from outside the city. This IS according to Hartford police arrest records for the six months from December 2008 to June 2009.

We pay an extraordinary expense for drug-related law enforcement. The figures back up that belief: illegal drugs cost each man, woman and child in the country \$1,000 each year; the federal and state governments spend \$50 billion each year trying to interrupt the flow of drugs into the U.S., health care costs related to illegal drugs are \$15.8 billion each year.

Critics say the so-called War on Drugs is a losing one and suggest we consider alternative strategies. When we do, however, we step gingerly: approving of medical marijuana, equalizing penalties for crack and powder cocaine, reconsidering commercial hemp agriculture.

We need to be bolder. Addiction, although tragic, is not a crime. It is a medical, social and public health issue. A criminal conviction does not help problem drug users; ironically it may, however, provide access to treatment while incarcerated. In spite of the danger of illegal drugs, one can argue that, absent direct harm to others, what we put into our bodies is a private matter. Only 2 percent of those who have smoked marijuana (estimated at 42 percent of the population over the age of 12) go on to hard drug use. Reported deaths from marijuana are so rare as to be statistically insignificant. Alcohol and tobacco — legal drugs — kill more than one half million people in the U.S. annually.

Here is a proposed alternative strategy:

- 1) Regulate and tax marijuana as we do alcohol and tobacco, setting a legal age minimum. Use the taxes for education, prevention and treatment of addiction and its underlying causes.

- 2) Make heroin and cocaine legally available to public health clinics for the treatment of addiction, where appropriate, alongside methadone.
- 3) Avoid prison for non-violent drug offenses, opting for treatment and counseling.
- 4) Prosecute those who commit crimes to obtain drugs, who drive under the influence of drugs and who grow, distribute or sell drugs illegally.

In a number of countries, Switzerland and Holland for example, where the above measures have been used, there has been no appreciable increase (or even a decrease) in drug use. Crime has fallen dramatically. Experts say that most of the chaos associated with the illegal drug market is the result of prohibition rather than the drugs consumed. Just as we learned from alcohol prohibition, the prohibition itself spawns increased crime and violence.

Pursing a failed strategy that has yielded tragically bad results makes no sense. It's time for a new approach.

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