

Drug Addiction and Criminology: The Continuing Need For Drug Reform

The continuous rise of drug-related criminal activity in the United States indicates that current reform policies simply are not working. Many examining the existence of crime <<http://www.criminology.com/>> are puzzled by the problem that drugs create and how best to stop the trade without affirming the behavior. Incarceration and other forms of corporal punishment for drug offenses are not only costly, but are also proving largely ineffective. Re-offenses are very common, and there is no evidence that the threat of imprisonment serves as any sort of real deterrent. The current state of American drug-related crime calls for an approach to the problem that is grounded in treatment and scientific research.

According to Bureau of Justice Statistics, US officials made more than 1.8 million drug violation arrests <<http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/content/dcf/enforce.cfm>> in 2007. Though slightly down from the previous year, this figure represents the steadily growing number of drug-related arrests since 1980, when the total hit only 580,990. Nearly 80 percent of the 1.8 million modern arrests concern drug possession. The remaining 322,200 pertain to drug manufacture, sale, or intent to sell.

Illegal drugs are illegal drugs, but it is worth noting that close to half of drug arrests concern marijuana. Marijuana is illegal to at least some degree in all 50 states, but its threat to public safety is often considered minimal when compared to other narcotics, such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine.

Public expenditure is another factor to consider in the drug policy issue. According to the Bureau of Prisons, the roughly 95,000 federal inmates incarcerated as of March 2012 were jailed on drug offenses <<http://www.bop.gov/news/quick.jsp>> . This number makes up almost half of the entire prison population. It is greater than total of federal inmates jailed for homicide, weapons/explosives, sex offenses, illegal immigration, and fraud combined.

It is currently estimated that one federal inmate costs roughly \$25,000 per year. Using this figure, BOP records would indicate that the federal prison system spent roughly \$2.4 billion on drug offenders in 2011 alone.

Rather than incarcerating drug offenders at such a high price tag, many have proposed a treatment-based approach to drug-related criminal activity. The Obama Administration is one of the most prominent supporters of such a plan. In April 2012, the President unveiled a new drug strategy <<http://news.yahoo.com/us-anti-drug-policy-stresses-treatment-prevention-181928717.html>> that shifted focus from criminal justice to public health. The program encourages medical providers to screen patients for illegal drugs in order to curb addiction and sets the foundation for a nationwide database to monitor doctors who over-prescribe painkillers. It stresses the need to incarcerate drug traffickers while emphasizing the effectiveness of treatment for drug abusers.

In support of its plan, the administration cited statistics that cocaine use has dropped 40 percent in the US, and methamphetamine use has been cut in half in recent years thanks not to the criminal justice department, but rather to public health initiatives. According to Yahoo! News, President Obama will seek \$10 billion from Congress to

create drug education programs nationwide and allow drug abusers to enter treatment. "There's a real reason to be optimistic that these reform efforts will reduce and continue to reduce drug use and its consequences on society," Gil Kerlikowske, Director of the National Drug Control Center, said in response to the Obama plan. "My colleagues -- police and others -- simply put, often say we can't arrest our way out of the drug problem."

Drug-related criminal activity will never be completely eradicated, but the Obama Administration's new policy represents a dramatic change from past strategies. By targeting those who distribute illegal narcotics and treating those who buy and abuse them, American drug policy is expected to operate on a much more effective level. This will be reflected not only by lowered costs, but also an increased number of reformed drug addicts. Other anti-drug coalitions and public health organizations would be wise to follow suit, and begin looking for treatment-based approaches to the growing drug problem in this country.