



The failure of Canadian drug policy

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Prohibition does not work. Worse, it wastes valuable public resources that could be better spent on actually

helping people. A perfect example of this is the so-called ‘war on drugs’ (an American term) and our own National Anti-drug Strategy (NADS).

At the forefront of the effort to make our drug laws smarter is the Canadian Drug Policy Coalition (CDPC). The group is a broad coalition of non-governmental organizations and individuals committed to create an approach to drug problems that will put the protection of public health and safety, social justice and equity ahead of criminalizing individuals. The CDPC calls for the decriminalization of currently illegal drugs, the regulation of cannabis and the expansion of harm reduction and treatment services across the country.

In May 2013 the CDPC released an important report on the state of Canadian drug policy and made significant recommendations that can move us forward. The report, “Getting to tomorrow: A report on Canadian drug policy,” is an excellent source for anyone trying to understand what is happening in Canada now, and what could be happening instead.

Law enforcement remains the primary method by which we deal with illegal drug use. This over reliance on the criminal justice system completely neglects all evidence that a public health approach to drugs would be more effective and beneficial to Canadians. No doubt one reason for this is the change of responsibility for the National Anti-Drug Strategy from Health Canada to the Justice Department in 2008. (When all you have

is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.) The NADS isolates drug use from the public health sphere, fails to address why people use drugs in harmful ways and ignores the value of a social development approach.

The failure of the prohibition approach is that it does not deliver on its goals: decreased drug use and increased public safety. Rather than curb access to drugs and reduce use, prohibition has resulted in the growth of illegal drug markets and the crime that is endemic to illegal markets. Instead of reducing the supply of drugs, the current approach abdicates any role in legally regulating drug markets, instead giving that power away to organized crime. Violence becomes the default tool for managing the illicit drug trade. The criminalization of drugs also makes it more difficult to engage people in vital and life-saving health care services.

The key to improving the situation is to move beyond policies like NADS and the

‘war’ analogy towards a public health approach to drugs that focuses on prevention, harm reduction, treatment, education, equity and health promotion.

Harm reduction services like needle exchanges help save lives and prevent the spread of infectious diseases, yet remain woefully under-resourced in Canada. Harm reduction services save lives and protect everyone’s health and are often the first steps people take toward healing.

Prohibition has never worked, and it is costing us more than we imagine. Moving even a portion of the NADS funding into health and other programs that actually help people would be far more effective than the ‘war.’

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