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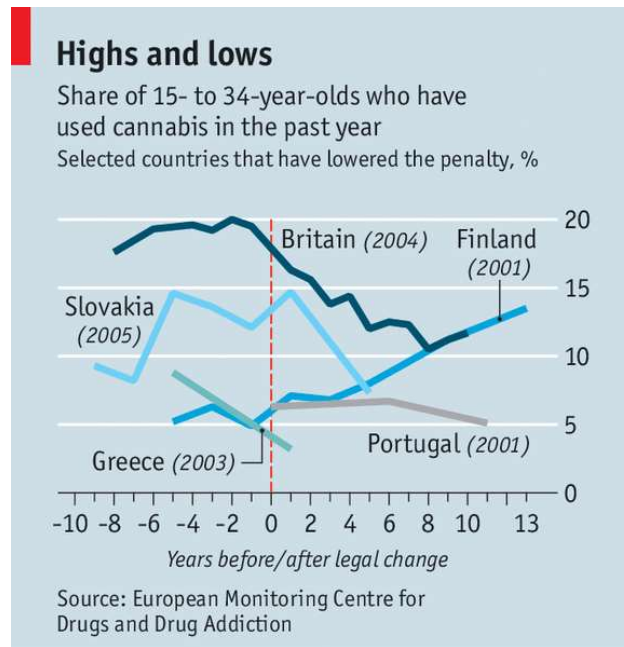
Drugs. They are everywhere, in our neighborhoods, streets and increasingly in our culture. Often, people look to them for recreational purposes- to dull pain be it emotional or physical. This can come a great price. Increasingly, more and more inmates being incarcerated are being booked for nonviolent crimes that involve drugs. This needs to change. Drug use in modern society should be seen as a mental illness and destigmatized so those afflicted can get the help they deserve.

On average in the US "...only 8 percent of federal prisoners were sentenced for violent crimes in 2011, almost half of federal inmates—48 percent—were in prison for drug crimes, according to Department of Justice statistics."(Flatow) This is an astonishingly high number for a crime that is oftentimes at the expense of the individual rather than the community. In a country where overcrowding and recidivism rates are skyrocketing a solution would be to decriminalize drugs. The term decriminalization is a legally defined as removing legislation that defines possession as a felonious offence, punishable by jail time. Decriminalization does NOT make the sale, consumption, and distribution of drugs legal, rather would make penalties much less than before, such as a fine or community service.

The counter argument is clear. What about those users who rob stores, sell to children, and other criminal activity? Well, under the tenets of decriminalization would still distinguish these types of crimes, which are more egregious, as grounds for jail time. It is important to note how decriminalization would not allow groups to deal drugs, growth or distribution of illicit substances, or even consumption, but would rather make lessen penalties. Those caught dealing to children, committing violent offences while intoxicated, and other violent felonies should still be subjected to trial but many of those on trial are often treated unfairly and without due process.

As the esteemed Mr. Outlaw states: “one issue lost in the reform discussion is how throughout federal sentencing law and practice, drug offenses are pervasively linked to violent offenses to lengthen prison sentences. Throughout federal criminal statutes, sentencing guidelines and policies, drug crimes and violent crimes are not only treated equally, but also interchangeably to increase a defendant’s prison sentence.” Clearly the current system needs to be changed. Felony charges should only be applied to those offenses which actively harm others. In law we see many being jailed for crimes that objectively would not be seen as violent, or even the extension of sentencing for drug usage.

By dropping the penalties for consuming drugs this will reduce, if not eliminate much of the stigma surrounding the usage of illicit substances. We see examples of this in Portugal according to Time magazine Portugal “decriminalized the possession of all drugs for personal use in 2001. Since then, overall drug use has fallen, HIV cases among drug users dropped, and overdose deaths are the second lowest in the E.U.” (Bajekal) The truth is, it is working in other nations with easier drug policies than the US. If we look at the numbers, the overall usage of drugs such as cannabis has decreased in countries that either legalized or decriminalized its use. The following is a diagram from the economist which highlights this.



Economist.com

Deaths are on the rise from drug related overdoses and abuse. These numbers continue to rise every year with seemingly no end in sight. Anika Reed, a writer at CQ researcher states that “According to the most recent official statistics, opioids — which include heroin and prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, morphine and methadone — were involved in more than 33,000 deaths in the United States in 2015. Heroin-related deaths alone surpassed gun homicides that year for the first time in recent history.” With these numbers continuing to rise it only becomes clearer that our current precedents are not working, and that legislative action is required for harm reduction. No longer should opioid users be treated as lepers but rather as human beings in need of a helping hand.

Studies in Portugal have shown that opioid related deaths and HIV rates due to sharing needles have decreased. This is no accident, it is a direct result of their lenient policy and treatment of addicts within their borders. The US needs to follow suit as soon as possible. People are dying simply because they don't wish to face legal repercussions for actions that are largely out of their control. Addiction becomes more of a physical and mental affliction rather than a crime that need to be punished. (Need some citations here this is a bit sparse)

Annotated Bib Decriminalization of Drugs

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