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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 often comes a great price. Increasingly, more and more inmates being incarcerated are being booked for nonviolent crimes that involve drugs. This needs to change. DARE. This program has been incorporated in many public school systems since its inception in 1983. The idea behind DARE was to reduce the rate at which our children consume harmful drugs, focusing mainly on alcohol and marijuana abuse. In theory this was a noble idea, in practice less so. In reality DARE did little to actually curb the use of drugs in fact, many high schoolers anonymously polled indicated that DARE had little to no effect on consumption and perhaps increased. (Citation needed here) Other countries have a markedly different approach to the topic. They (who) treat drugs as a reality in life and expect some to consume them. In Portugal the drug programs in place teach harm reduction and aim at reducing the consumption of various substances.

The Portuguese version of DARE is called Operational Plan of Integrated Responses or PORI for short according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). This is a public organization that operates within the EU to provide nonpartisan statistics about drug usage within the EU. PORI is an intervention system designed to reduce the actual demand of psychoactive substances within Portugal, it is aimed primarily at students. This

program differs from DARE in that they also provide counseling for at risk children and seek to educate parents about the realities of drug usage. This approach is far more hands-on rather than a health class curriculum. In conjunction with decriminalization education programs need to become more robust and honest with younger generations. The first step to treating abuse is education, we need to take an example from Portugal and teach the tenets of responsibility rather than treating users as criminals.

Laws will not change over-night, more lives and dollars will be lost- unless something changes. If the US were to model its legislations in a manner similar to Portugal we would almost certainly see a reduction in [drug] usage and incarceration statistics. This is a solution to a very real issue that plagues us as a nation. In the US we have one of the highest percentages of inmates per person than any other nation in the world. Many would oppose decriminalization, at first glance it appears to make drugs legal, but in reality it merely makes penalties much softer and treats abusers as medically ill. Over half of these are related to the consumption of illicit substances. This could change.

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 these crimes would still distinguished as egregious, and 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. Decriminalization would serve to lessen the number of inmates in prison for drug related offenses, freeing up valuable tax dollars.

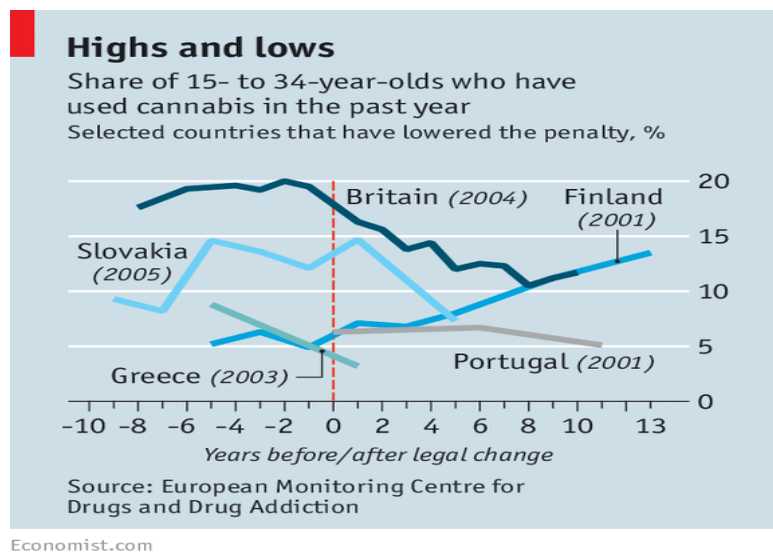
Often-times when someone is put to trial for a drug offence they are not treated fairly as our justice system puts steep and sometimes unfair penalties on users. As the esteemed Mr. Outlaw states:

...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 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 on the subject of Portugal “[has] 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.



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. With the addition of decriminalization, we may see a decline in consumption of psychoactive substances based on the data extrapolated from various studies.

In Portugal studies 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. Researchers J.S. Melo and associates found that "...the impact of law enforcement suggests that police interactions with [people who inject drugs] may increase behavioral risks for injection-driven disease transmission and thereby intensify syndemics." Melo and colleagues came to this conclusion by performing a cross sectional study in three cities, San Francisco, Tijuana, and Vancouver over the course of two years. Their data suggests a strong correlation between previous law enforcement encounters and continued use of intravenous drugs. The implications here are staggering, often societal norms would advocate for increased police presence in order to reduce harm, but this research appears to directly contradict this common theory.

Annotated Bib Decriminalization of Drugs

Drug Offenders in American Prisons: The Critical Distinction Between Stock and Flow

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