

The criminal justice system has come a long way since the formation of our nation, but as with most things, it can still be better. If I were to make one change to the criminal justice system, it would be to alter the penalties of drug possession. Too often, people are being punished for using select substances, instead of receiving the help they need. While many of these substances are dangerous, it is wrong to assume the people using them are also dangerous. Alcohol, a mind-altering substance, is federally legalized; marijuana is becoming legalized in more states with every election; and psilocybin mushrooms have even been legalized in one state. Alcohol and marijuana are both heavily taxed, bringing in extra income to the states and allowing for the funding of community programs. The question then becomes, why are other mind-altering substances criminalized instead of being legally regulated.

Mind altering substances and the people who use them have become stigmatized in our society. This only increased when Nixon embarked on the 'War on Drugs' and still continues to this day in differing severity throughout the United States. Criminalizing the use of these substances has an increased burden on all of society. More tax dollars are being funneled into the criminal justice system, especially considering 25% of incarcerated people were arrested for drug charges (Pearl, 2018). People who are users are also more likely to die of overdoses, as these deaths have significantly increased since 1999 (Gostin et al., 2019). Substance use arrests and convictions are also closely related to an individual's race, as a Black American is more likely to be arrested for drug possession and will receive longer sentences than their White counterparts (Pearl, 2018). From this information, it is safe to conclude that the War on Drugs has morphed into a War on Americans, as everyone is being negatively affected by this movement.

One way to handle the substance abuse crisis in America is to offer support to users instead of fear. A way to do this would be to establish supervised consumption services in the

United States. These facilities often receive a negative response, as they are seen as an allowance and support of prolonged drug use, especially since little knowledge about these facilities is known by the general public. People who utilize these services are able to go to a safe facility where they can be monitored, educated, and offered first aid if needed (Drug Policy Alliance, n.d.). Employees are there to support the clients and do not actually administer the substance. Despite the misconceptions surrounding substance consumption services, they have led to promising advances. Clients are more likely to enroll and adhere to substance use disorder treatments, and they receive social services they would otherwise be unable to access. These facilities have also led to a decrease in overdoses, overall substance usage, and unsafe needle practices. These facilities are saving lives and money by reducing the stigmatization of substance use. Ten countries around the world have already established these systems into their drug management policies. Sadly, the United States is not one of these forward-moving countries.

Instead of continuing to focus on the War on Drugs, we should move towards a creation of unity among Americans. Johann Hari, author of *Chasing the Scream*, summarizes the addiction problem in America succinctly by stating, “Addiction is an adaptation. It’s not you — it’s the cage you live it.” In a society rooted in a culture of individualism, it makes sense that substance abuse, a result of insufficient community support, is still a large problem. Addiction is perceived as an individual problem, despite the larger societal ramifications. Countries taking a collectivist approach through the use of supervised consumption services have witnessed the positive results of community support. The next step would be for American to follow suit.

My work as a Community Health Educator has enabled me to see the positive ramifications of creating connection to support healthy behavior changes. My own personal experience, along with the statistical information gathered through many different studies, leads

me to want to change how substance abuse is handled by our criminal justice system. However, it will most likely be a long time before this ineffective approach is abandoned. As stated by Gostin et. al. (2019), “The Department of Justice (DOJ) recently threatened criminal prosecutions for SIF operators, medical personnel, and patrons.” The laws and the handling of illegal acts are influenced by not only the criminal justice system, but our community. In order to make a change on how drug use is legally handled, the public perception must be changed. With the growing popularity of legalizing previously illegal substances, it makes sense to decriminalize other drugs as well. Instead of spending enormous amounts of money to arrest, convict, and jail people who use illegal substances, we should help them to receive compassion, community, and support. Only by doing this will we see a real change in our current American justice system.

Works Cited:

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