

Alyson Clements: War on Drugs has broken everything but the trade

This summer marks the 40th anniversary of the War on Drugs. While most anniversaries are marked with celebration, the War on Drugs is cause for critical reflection.

The War on Drugs can best be summed as a series of ironies: From the fact that Caucasians have the highest rate of drug use and lowest incarceration rate, to the fact that drugs have increased in availability since the war started, the joke is on us. As if this irony isn't enough, Nixon was right!

Perhaps the greatest irony in the 40-year battle on drugs is that it was originally waged in the name of drug treatment. Time Magazine's June 28, 1978 issue is one of few sources that still pay homage to the reasoning behind Nixon's War on Drugs. When Nixon claimed drugs were America's greatest enemy, he did not intend to conjure up images of police raids and mandatory minimums. Instead, as The Public Broadcasting Company corroborates, Nixon preached treatment as the most effective means of combating drug use by Caucasian military personnel returning from Vietnam hooked on heroin. That's right. The drug war was originally a treatment campaign for white middle class Americans!

Somewhere between 1971 and today, Nixon's message has been distorted. America has militarized rather than "medicalized" drug abuse, pointing to the word "war" as justification. Rather than tackling the war on addictions, we have waged war on taxpayers' wallets, spending \$1 trillion dollars to incarcerate non-violent offenders and causing a new budgetary crisis in prison overcrowding.

West Virginia has 1,700 more prisoners than prison beds. The Charleston Daily Mail reported in April that 21.9 percent of those incarcerated in West Virginia are in custody for drug related offenses, up 6.2 percent from 2004 with exponential growth predicted through 2020. Regardless of his rationale, Nixon was right.

We must turn to treatment. The cost effectiveness alone is undeniable. An evaluation by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found residential treatment coupled with vocational training and support services costs an average of \$32,974 per individual compared to the \$64,338 average cost of a prison term. Furthermore, the state of Maryland reported the use of treatment sanctions reduced the cost per offender from \$20,000 to \$4,000 a year. Multiplying these savings times the 1,403 individuals incarcerated for drug offenses in West Virginia, the state could see savings as high as \$22 million a year.

While the numbers themselves are compelling, we must not forget that those behind bars are more than just a number; they are individuals. The stories of people imprisoned by drug codes read like satire. Prisons are not overcrowded with white middle class Americans first targeted by Nixon's campaign. Instead, the drug war has deemed certain populations worth throwing away through its selective enforcement practices. As a result, our prisons are filled with African Americans convicted of petty offenses, while their college counterparts party on. Just as ironically, prison does not train, treat or rehabilitate. Not only are individuals in no better state when they leave, they are impeded by their criminal histories. Such criminal histories cause them to be unemployable, increasing their chances of recidivating and repeating the cycle.

When rehabilitation and job training cost the state less in both the short term and long term, how can we afford to throw away our citizens' futures?

Supporters of the War on Drugs claim the high costs incurred are justified by their gains in public safety. After all, who can put a price tag on a good night's sleep knowing our children are safe? It is a comforting feeling, but invalid. According to the West Virginia Law Enforcement Agency's Uniform Crime Report, our crime rate has increased from 24,552 incidents in 1971 to 51,377 incidents as of 2009. In other words, our crime rate has almost doubled while our population has only seen an increase of 4 percent. Some may write it off as a sign of the times, but consider the alternative. Texas (of all places) has implemented a number of reforms in recent years that prioritize drug treatment over incarceration, resulting in their lowest crime rate since

1973. Data indisputably show drug treatment increases public safety, societal productivity, and is more cost-effective. Nixon was right.

It is easy to point a finger at someone who uses or sells drugs, as we have been indoctrinated into believing justice is synonymous with prison. But in the battle against drugs, such short-sighted "justice" has only served to exacerbate the problem: increasing drug availability and decreasing public safety.

Indisputably, the "war on drugs" neither provides justice for the American public nor those sentenced to life behind bars for non-violent acts.

It is time we heed the words of Nixon and change our tactic, ending the War on Drugs and instead, launching an attack on addiction.

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