

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.acluohio.org/en/news/jeff-sessions-dead-wrong-drug-policy-and-he-may-cost-people-their-lives>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

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Attorney General Jeff Sessions spoke in Columbus, Ohio on Wednesday to discuss the opioid epidemic both on the state and national level. It is no exaggeration to call it an epidemic. In 2016 alone, over 4100 Ohioans [died from opioid overdoses](#), marking a 36% increase from 2015's record-breaking number. While opioids first took hold in Appalachian Ohio, they are now roiling all parts of the state urban, rural and suburban.

This crisis in Ohio and many other parts of the nation is a product of the disastrous drug war that Jeff Sessions wants to bring back. Perhaps no contemporary social policy has failed as spectacularly as the War on Drugs. It has cost taxpayers trillions of dollars, stigmatized millions of Americans with criminal records, and ravaged communities of color by focusing resources on enforcement of drug laws that erode the economic base and fail to invest in communities. In Ohio, our prison system is built for 38,000 people but we have nearly 51,000 people incarcerated, and a quarter of all new commitments to prison is for a drug related offense.

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Jeff Sessions wants to double down on these failed policies, despite the fact that there is growing bi-partisan support for smart on crime reforms. In his speech, he said America must create a climate that is hostile to drug abuse confirming Sessions' desire to resurrect the War on Drugs and lock up more people in prison and jail.

Enforcement-heavy approaches will only plunge more people into the criminal justice system, leaving them without treatment and without hope. To truly address the opioid crisis, states must begin to treat it as a public health issue rather than one for the criminal justice system. Prisons and jails are simply not as effective at providing treatment as other alternatives. Community-based solutions often cost far less, and they use strategies that work, including individualized treatment plans with, long-term counseling and support. The federal government should be encouraging communities to prioritize these and other evidence-based strategies such as methadone treatment or syringe exchanges.

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Sessions doesn't understand that rampant opioid use is not a result of too few drug criminalization laws. Many people first become addicted to opioids because of chronic pain, and have no other viable alternative to address their medical issues. In his announcement, Sessions promised to dispatch new prosecutors in a dozen states to pursue criminal investigations against doctors and pharmacists who may be over-prescribing medications. While there may be cases where pain management medication is over-prescribed, the reality is that many people live every day with chronic pain and these new policies could make doctors fearful to prescribe needed treatment.

If Jeff Sessions was truly concerned about providing individuals with low-risk medications to effectively treat their medical conditions, he would support the legalization of marijuana. Instead, he has suggested enforcing federal laws against the use of marijuana even in states that have legalized medical and personal use.

Besides struggling with physical pain, many other people become addicted to drugs because they do not have opportunities. These individuals might have mental health concerns, but cannot access treatment, so they self-medicate. Others may grow up in poverty, where they do not have access to education, jobs, and other important opportunities. Responding to these systemic issues with threats to lock up more people only perpetuates the misery that has caused these communities to have a lack of opportunities in the first place. This ensures that generations of neighborhoods will be locked in the same sick cycle that the War on Drugs began churning over 50 years ago.

For many people, Jeff Sessions' policies may be a matter of life and death. State and local leaders are buckling under the weight of the increase in overdoses and we have seen many respond in desperate ways that often harm the community more than help it. One Ohio town [started charging people](#) who overdosed with inducing panic once emergency responders came to revive them. Local officials said they wanted to get these individuals into treatment programs, but this practice only served to criminalize them and discouraged loved ones from calling for help. The idea has now spread to several other towns across the state.

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A councilmember in a different Ohio city [proposed adopting a policy](#) of three strikes and you're dead where emergency responders will

not answer calls from individuals who have overdosed two previous times. The local sheriff in this same community also [pledged he would not allow his deputies to carry naloxone](#), which treats overdoses. Such callous responses show that with a lack of alternatives, most officials are revisiting policies that are heavy on enforcement and fail to treat the root cause behind the overdoses.

In Ohio and everywhere, Jeff Sessions wrong-headed return to the War on Drugs digs a deeper hole that will take more generations to dig our way out of.

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