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### The Heroin Epidemic

In present day America, we are able to see many major issues unfold. We are faced with issues concerning drug wars, marriage rights, privacy rights, and so much more (Smith).

However, the most severe of them all is the heroin epidemic (Sifferlin). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, have released new information that tells us that the number of heroin overdoses has doubled and that heroin abuse has increased 63% over the past decade (Curry). Many researchers have identified that this is a serious issue but have yet to discover a reliable solution to the epidemic in America. One way we can answer this epidemic is by analyzing the way other countries have handled this same issue successfully.

A prime example of a country who successfully dealt with the heroin epidemic would be Portugal. After seeing no results from the drug wars, the Portuguese government decided to battle the heroin epidemic by decriminalizing the possession of all drugs in 2001 (Aleem). The results were extraordinary: The amount of deaths caused by drug overdose radically declined over the years (Aleem). After decriminalizing all drugs, Portugal is found to have the second lowest drug overdose rate out of every European country in the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction data analysis (Aleem). Our country can learn a lot from this example.

Like Portugal, American can also take the radical step of decriminalizing heroin and other drugs in order to address this epidemic. Decriminalizing heroin will allow America to overcome this epidemic because it will allow room for innovation, encourage users to get medical help with their addictions, and reduce the number of deaths caused by drug overdose.

By decriminalizing heroin, America will be able to open up to innovation that will allow our country to continue taking steps towards battling this epidemic. These innovations would allow us to build places that would help addicts everywhere in our country. This allows our country to open up to innovative creativity when thinking of ways to help bring an end to this epidemic. These innovations have not been previously made because of heroin's illegal status. An example of these innovations would include safe houses. These safe houses could be legal facilities that allow drug addicts to inject naloxone, or naran, into themselves in the case of a life or death emergency. Naran is an opiate antidote that blocks the effects of opioids and actually reverses an overdose (Naran). Also, these centers would have clean utensils and medical assistants to help. Or, in another case, we could even have facilities where people can learn how to cope with their addictions by attending a facility that shows them what they can take besides heroin to satisfy their addiction in a healthier way. In addition, they could learn to be more sanitary with their needles and other utensils to prevent the user from being at risk for other diseases that can be transferred through unsanitary practices and the sharing of needles.

Not only will the decriminalization of heroin open America to innovation, it will also allow users to seek medical help without fear of being in trouble with the authorities for possessing and using heroin. In Portugal, if someone is caught with less than a 10day supply of heroin, they are directed to a local commission made up of a social worker, a lawyer, and a doctor who either refer the person to a specific treatment or have them pay a small fine (Aleem). Most of the time a person facing the local commision faces no penalty at all (Aleem).

Decriminalizing heroin in our country will allow American citizens who suffer from heroin abuse get the help they need in order to continue their work and their daily life if we follow in the same steps as Portugal. We can also make treatment and help centers more accessible for citizens caught with heroin instead of sending them to jail. If these users are caught showing signs of addiction, they should be referred to free medical services that will allow them to get off their opioid addiction slowly by transferring to a different substance rather than heroin until they reach sobriety.

Without fear of getting in trouble with the authorities, more people are likely to get medical help when in a life or death emergency due to heroin abuse. This alone has the potential to radically reduce the number of deaths in our nation that are due to heroin over dosage. For instance, if a person overdoses at a party, no one will have taken them to an Emergency Room due to fear of getting in trouble with the authorities. But if heroin is decriminalized, then they will have no penalty to face. Instead, the person would be properly treated with narcan at a local facility. However, right now, if someone dials 911 or drops a friend at the hospital for a heroin

overdose, they are subject to prosecution for possession, use, and distribution of heroin. In a recent case in Chicago, an overdosing woman and man that called 911 for her were both arrested (Shenfeld). A representative of the Drug Policy Alliance, Meghan Ralston, said, “That sends a chilling, disturbing message to all people who will one day witness an overdose. It says, ‘Don’t call 911 because you and the victim will be arrested,’” (Shenfeld). However, by decriminalizing heroin, we can change this and encourage people to call 911 and go to the ER in order to save the life of a friend or family member.

**Note to students: This is the refutation.**

Even though Portugal was successful in its bold move to decriminalize heroin, many people believe that it should not be decriminalized because of how most countries make it illegal. Nonetheless, just because other countries make drugs like heroin illegal doesn’t mean that their war on drugs is nonexistent. Studies have shown that the prohibition of drugs does not work and only does the opposite of what it’s intended to do (Vohryzek). Author Malakkar Vohryzek shares his view over this topic when he writes in his article saying, “Black markets mean trade takes place wherever it's most convenient or covert no one sells alcohol on school campuses, yet illicit drugs are regularly made available there. Prohibition, by design, places children in danger, by ensuring that homes and schools are used as avenues of drug distribution, rather than hospitals, pharmacies, and stores places where regulation could be enforced easily” (Vohryzek). Here,

Vohryzek makes a strong argument when he suggest that the only way to truly control our nation's heroin epidemic is by regulating the drug in pharmacies and stores rather than black markets.

Another argument people have against the decriminalization of heroin is that it will encourage more citizens to use heroin since there is no real penalty. However, if we analyze the results of Portugal, we can see that they did not experience a rise in heroin use since their decriminalization on all drugs about 15 years ago. In fact, it is statistically proven that the decriminalization of heroin has been a successful tactic when dealing with the heroin epidemic in that country (Aleem). Recent information tells us that Portugal's drug use declined 25% since its decriminalization in 2001 (Aleem). To this day, that number continues to decline (Aleem).

By switching the heroin epidemic from the hands of the authorities to the hand of doctors, we will see that America will be able to overcome this epidemic. We can do this by decriminalizing heroin in our country. Decriminalizing heroin is the answer to overcoming this issue in our country because it will encourage users to seek medical help, reduce the number of overdose induced deaths. and allow room for innovation.

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