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### **Demand Targeting as A More Effective Means for Combatting the War on Drugs**

The war on drugs is a campaign dedicated to the prohibition of drug trade with aims to end the illegal manufacture, importation, selling, and abuse of illicit substances. In the early 1970s, Richard Nixon, representing the US government, has declared that “America’s public enemy number one... is drug abuse.” (“Richard Nixon on the War on Drugs”) Since then, the US government has been fighting this war to help eliminate two key issues; substance use disorders (SUDs), otherwise drug addiction, and unethical proliferation of narcotics industries. Psychoactive drugs threat public health through SUDs, and are fueled by narcotics industries aiming to take advantage of addicted vulnerable individuals. What’s worse is that narcotics industries create political destabilization, resulting in increased crime rates that further jeopardize public safety and our own human rights.

A third issue arises; is the US successful in their means on combatting the war on drugs? This topic is still heavily debated when it doesn’t need to be; the answer lies in statistics. Mona Chalabi outlined statistics from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) showing that the price of illicit substances like cannabis, powder cocaine, and heroin, have remained unchanged or have only decreased slightly since the 1990s. Since pricing of illicit substances hasn’t changed significantly, it’s probable that supply and demand have remained stable. The slight lowering in price can be explained by either increasing supply, or the decreasing demand. Which is it, or is it a combination of both?

The DEA's 2015 National Drug Threat Assessment Summary claims that "heroin is available in larger quantities," (25) "methamphetamine use may be increasing," (46) and that "marijuana use among young adults in college is increasing." (70). The DEA also reports that US domestic drug seizures, by mass in kilograms, have all on average increased from 1986 to 2015; significantly for cannabis, heroin, and methamphetamines ("DEA Domestic Drug Seizures"). What parallels the outright increase in drug supply, is drug use. The National Institute on Drug abuse reports that American trends in estimated number of overdose deaths from cocaine, heroin, opioids, and benzodiazepines have all been increasing since 2001 ("National Overdose Death Rates"). The slight lowering in drug price is thus likely due to increasing drug supplies in the US. It's clear that their illegal manufacture, importation, and selling has also increased. The US war on drugs is blatantly ineffective.

The narcotics industry, like most industries, functions on the existence of supply and demand. If the US government can eliminate any of these two elements, the narcotics industry will stall and the war on drugs should cease. Accordingly, the US federal government has spent at least 20 billion dollars each year since 2013 solely on drug control through domestic law enforcement, interdiction, and international involvement, with an average of only 5% dedicated to prevention ("Federal Drug Control Spending by Function"). Not only was domestic law enforcement becoming more severe towards drug related cases, but Stephen D. Easton showed that drug related incarceration periods have on average been increasing since the 1980s. This was the US government's way of discouraging involvement in the narcotics industry yet, drug abuse violations have more than doubled since the 1980s, per the Bureau of Justice Programs. Attempting to control the manufacture, importation, and dealing of drugs while increasing

severity of drug prohibition policies has not shown to discourage drug related activity. Supply targeting simply can't be won with stricter prohibition policies.

Clearly, the US government focuses largely on targeting the supply of illicit substances by incarcerating manufacturers, traffickers, and dealers. Even with billions of dollars invested annually, increasing severity of drug prohibition policies has not shown significant reductions in drug abuse violations. Supply targeting only temporarily suppresses the war on drugs and costs the economy while demand targeting could solve the roots of the issue, lowering SUDs, reducing crime rates, and therefore increasing public safety to fashion healthier and more productive societies. When fighting the war on drugs, the US government ought to focus more on reducing society's demand for illicit substances, as opposed to using hardline policies of drug prohibition to reduce its supply. The rest of this essay will aim to explain the negative consequences and inefficiency of supply targeting all while arguing for demand targeting as a more effective approach to combatting the war on drugs.

Supply and demand in the narcotics industry is unique; if supply is eliminated and demand persists, a new supply source will eventually reappear to profit from the existing demand. The psychological dependence of drugs is a powerful motivator for the purchase of narcotic substances, and it is this mental necessity within 'hooked individuals' that the drug industry seeks to exploit. For as long as this psychological dependence exists, drug users will purchase products no matter what the cost. In a market with low price sensitivity, it might not be effective to solely target supply of drugs because no matter how successful the US government is at reducing drug supply, the resulting increased selling price of drugs will in turn attract more individuals to the business. Stella M. Rouse and Moises Arce outline this effect as the Balloon effect, "whereby government efforts to squeeze illicit trade in one area result in the expansion of

that trade elsewhere.” (542). Their research showed that “eradication operations have been relatively successful in ‘squeezing out’ coca production in both Bolivia and Peru,” yet “the drug industry gravitated toward Columbia.” (555) Charles Laffiteau, an international relations and public policy research scholar and journalist, further confirms these results of the balloon effect.

Similarly, the US government attempted to control crystal meth production within the country by strictly regulating precursor chemicals used for its production (“Controlling Precursor Chemicals”). There was a great degree of success in shutting down major meth labs; however, this only suppressed the issue. Meth production operations merely shifted to smaller scaled labs using other precursor chemicals. Supply was unaffected. Even stricter chemical regulations forced meth manufacturing over into Mexico. Again, supply was unaffected (“Why The War on Drugs Is a Huge Failure”). The balloon effect is a reality and supply targeting is a mere suppressant of the drug war.

According to the US Office of National Drug Control Policy, supply targeting includes “regulation (through the Controlled Substances Act), enforcement of anti-drug laws, eradication of marijuana cultivation, control of precursor chemicals, customs' inspection of commerce and persons entering the country, screening for drugs in prisons, and the creation of drug-free school zones” (“*A Comprehensive Approach: Reducing the Supply of Illegal Drugs*”) all which require tremendous funds to sustain. Furthermore, the DEA estimates that less than 10% of illicit substances are actually captured (Telesmanich, Jim). For the little positive outcome supply targeting has brought, it may just be an economic deadweight.

To eliminate drug manufacturers, smugglers, and dealers, the census is to move them into prisons where punishment is to convince them of their mal doing. However, only 18% of drug

related incarcerations are due to the selling or manufacture, while the rest is for illegal possession or use (N. Snyder, Howard). If the goal of the war on drugs is to protect people from drug abuse, why are we throwing users in prison? This inefficient approach of mass incarceration costs tax payers nearly 39 billion US dollars annually (Henrichson, Christian *et al.*) just to sustain unproductive prison lives. Supply targeting has a hefty price for its implementation, with annual investments of 20 billion towards drug eradication (“Federal Drug Control Spending by Function”), 39 billion for keeping inmates alive, and \$193 billion to lost work productivity, crime, and substance abuse treatment (“Costs of Substance Abuse”) totalling to around 252 billion annually. With a 90% failure rate in drug seizures, the US government persists with supply targeting. Is it worth it?

Drug related crime rates are influenced by many factors, and supply targeting is one of those factors. Supply targeting requires the existence of drug prohibition; consequently, drug prohibition causes gangs and cartels to lost access to a justice system. Assuming an individual in the narcotics industry witnesses systematic human rights abuses, seeking a justice system for help only results in their own incarceration; as a result, discouraging them from reporting to a justice system. Take for example San Diego’s surge in methamphetamine trafficking during 1993. The US Justice Department confirms that this trafficking

“has been accompanied by an increase in violence. A methamphetamine distribution organization was implicated in at least 26 murders committed during a 6-month period...fueled by an ongoing turf battle between two rival methamphetamine distribution organizations that began with the murder of one of the organizations' leaders.” (“Production and Trafficking: Major Methamphetamine Trafficking Organizations”)

To solve conflict, those involved in narcotics ultimately resort to brutality and violence, thus increasing homicide rates

However, homicide rates in the US per 100'000 people have declined from 5.7 in 2007 to 3.9 in 2012. Should drug prohibition in the US increase homicide rates, why are they declining? The balloon effect is the answer. Since much of the narcotics industry is forced out of the US and into other countries, homicide rates surge elsewhere. In the same time that US homicide rates declined, Mexico's has risen from 7.8 in 2007 to 21.3 in 2012 ("Crime and Criminal Justice: Homicide counts and rates (2000-2014)"). Increased incarceration rates have also shown to lead to increased crime rates as explained by Mauer (1999) in Kurt L. Schmokes journal:

"The negative consequences of high incarceration rates in some communities may actually lead to increases in crime in those communities... children whose parents are imprisoned... begin to act out in school or distrust authority figures that represent the people who removed the parent from the home... In far too many cases, these children come to represent the next generation of offenders." (p.101)

The US government utterly fails reacting to the fact that the war on drugs itself, is a major cause to problems we associate with drug related crimes and homicides, especially in foreign countries.

Fortunately, the US federal drug control budget *does recognize* that "supply reduction efforts have proven ineffective, costly, and destructive" yet "less than 45 percent [of the federal drug control budget] is devoted to treatment, education and prevention," otherwise known as demand reduction. If the youngest generation is educated on health consequences related to drug abuse, they should be deterred to purchase narcotic substances. Even then, education does not have a 100% success rate as a drug deterrent. A more fundamental approach needs to be considered.

What if the government provided high grade illicit substances free of charge for public use at safe and clean administration sites? This approach may seem counter productive because every individual has access to highly potent illicit substances, yet, it has worked brilliantly in other countries around the world.

To be clear, this method is different from simple legalization of illicit substances. Legalization entails that the public can purchase, possess, and abuse legalized drugs in privacy; however, this method continues to involve strict government regulation of illicit substances. If the government were to suddenly provide narcotics to the public, the existing demand would be satisfied before illegal markets could reach drug users. In addition, if these substances were suddenly free of charge and of adjustable potency than found on the street, drug abusers would be more inclined to access government facilities, thus running street markets out of business. Without profit, street markets will disintegrate and police efforts to incarcerate dealers would not need to be as intensive. Why buy drugs when the government can provide them free and of adjustable potency?

Disabling street markets from functioning would also deter mass narcotics producers from targeting these local distribution points. Because the street market is the main source of drug distribution to the public, and dealers no longer make a profit off the public, this form of demand targeting would eventually cause unregulated narcotics industries to stall. Due to lacking profits that cannot sustain operational business costs, unregulated narcotics industries would be forced to exploit other profitable regions where governments do not already satisfy public drug demand.

After the unregulated supply of narcotics is eliminated, the next step would be to focus on the drug users themselves. British Columbia's Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS reports that "illicit use of injected drugs is linked with high rates of HIV infection and fatal overdose, as well as community concerns about drug use." (Kerr, Thomas, *et al.* 1) Simply providing drugs to users is not enough; disease through dirty needles and uncontrolled dosages persist in being hazards to public safety. So how can government facilities actually treat SUDs, and protect users while at the same time providing debilitatingly addictive substances?

Firstly, the facility should provide a sense of well being by offering social workers, showers, withdrawal programs, and other support systems that help divert the abuser's focus from drugs to a more productive livelihood. Second to treating drug abusers, to protect them, these specialized government facilities would need to provide clean needles, safe doping sites, and prescribed dosages by present doctors. Provision of safe injection sites was essentially coined the harm reduction method and has already proven successful outside the US. The Swiss government in the early 1980s implemented this method to counter a deteriorating heroin epidemic. Heroin abuse shattered the country by significantly increasing not only SUDs, but also HIV rates, street prostitution, and crime rates (Csete, Joanne *et al.*) Carlos Nordt and Rudolf Stohler hypothesized that the "harm reduction policy of Switzerland and its emphasis on the medicalisation of the heroin problem seems to have contributed to the image of heroin as unattractive for young people" (Nordt, Carlos *et al.* 1) and thanks to this added effect, "heroin-assisted therapy yielded evidence of significant HIV prevention and crime reduction that was convincing not only to policy-makers but also to a skeptical Swiss public." (Csete, Joanne *et al.* 1) Also implemented in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Spain, Australia, and Canada, (Elliot, Richard, *et al.*) the harm reduction method's success with "reduced HIV-risk behavior



and overdose deaths” ( Elliot, Richard, *et al.* 111) satisfied precisely what society was hoping for.

The US government’s war on drugs is an utter failure. Their tactic for engaging in this unique war sits on the idea that enforcing hardline drug prohibition policies will eventually lead to reductions in SUD prevalence and increased public health and safety. The attrition war on supply targeting increases homicide rates from lacking justice systems in narcotics industries, costs the economy an estimated quarter trillion annually, and most importantly, only briefly suppresses the greatest issue; growing demand of drugs. Instead of fighting to end the narcotic industry’s *ability* to proliferate, we must end their *will* to proliferate. To do so, the US government must satisfy public drug demand independently through harm reduction methods. Demand targeting not only destroys business opportunity for narcotics industries, it also reduces healthcare costs, HIV rates, overdose mortality rates, drug related crime rates, and in return, increases public health and safety.

The violent war on drugs cannot persist if we want to preserve the well being of our friends and family. To approach this issue with a new mindset is to promote health, community, peace, and the strongest spirit of humanitarianism.

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