

War on Drugs a success

By Peter Bensinger

Last Modified: Jun 10, 2011 06:22PM

Jesse Jackson's recent column "on a failed war on drugs" demands a rebuttal based on science and the facts. Rev. Jackson, to his credit, has preached against using drugs, but his conclusion that the drug control effort has been wasted is dead wrong.

In fact, in 1978, 25 million Americans used an illegal drug once a month, when our population was 280 million. In 2009, there were 21 million illegal drug users, a decrease of 20 percent. Since when is a 20 percent decrease a failure?

Ninety-two percent of Americans do not use illegal drugs. Drugs are not as available as they were 40 years ago, and fewer people are dying of heroin overdose deaths.

I know because from 1976 to 1981, I was administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. In 1976, we had more than 500,000 heroin addicts and over 2,000 heroin overdose deaths. This has decreased significantly; currently there are 200,000 heroin users, less than half the number of 35 years ago and half the heroin overdose deaths.

Our prisons are overcrowded; not because casual users of marijuana are in prison. Less than 1 percent of all inmates in state prisons are there because of the use or possession of marijuana. They are in prison because of other charges, some involving drugs but for sale or trafficking. They are also there because we do not have enough drug courts, which have recidivism rates of 16 percent compared to 45 percent for offenders not in those programs. They are in prison because we have a probation system that is ineffective and because we tolerate a high crime rate and have more gun dealers than gas stations.

Drugs are addictive, cause impairment with work, learning, co-ordination, short-term memory, and long-term health. Legalize cocaine and crack, which cause rapid heart rate, arrhythmia and three overdose deaths a day? Legalize marijuana, which contain 468 different chemicals and 60 percent more cancer-causing agents than a cigarette and is particularly harmful for brain development in adolescents? Drugged driver fatalities are three times higher in states with medical marijuana.

The effort to control drugs is not solely a law enforcement responsibility. It requires greater efforts by parents, more resources in prevention and treatment and effective diversion programs, which Rev. Jackson recognizes. Chicago's St. Patricks High School has implemented a mandatory random testing program for all students, not just athletes. The result is higher graduation rates, better attendance, higher college admissions and fewer disciplinary problems than other comparable schools.

Not all efforts involve taxpayer money. The private sector has driven down drug use in the workplace

dramatically, not by avoiding the issue but with clear drug abuse policies, education, drug testing and employee assistance programs. Productivity rates have risen significantly.

The federal government has invested time and money and lives in fighting drug abuse, but the social costs for treatment, lost productivity, accidents and crime are 10 times higher. In fact, this year's federal drug enforcement budget is the same as the cost of one Aegis Cruiser for the Navy. Drug abuse is a public health problem, but removing criminal sanctions will open the floodgates of use and abuse. Use of illegal drugs is lower by 20 percent from 30 years ago. We need to do more in prevention and treatment, including having Rev. Jackson preach about the dangers of drug abuse without giving up on our commitment to prevent it.

Peter Bensinger was administrator of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration from 1976-1981 and director of the Illinois Department of Corrections from 1970-1973.

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