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Final Essay

Is it Right to Decriminalize Drugs for Recreational Use for Adults?

“Decriminalize: [dee-krim-uh-nl-ahyz] (verb) 1. To eliminate criminal penalties for or remove legal restrictions against” (Dictionary.com, 2014). The decriminalization of drugs has been a pressing issue in today’s society recently, which is the reason our class decided to explore the topic this semester. There are many factors to take under consideration when discussing the decriminalization of drugs such as its effect on crime rate, incarceration, rate of drug use, and if it is a danger to public safety. We also discussed decriminalization’s effect on the economy and if it is a danger to public health. We were able to agree implementing the decriminalization of drugs will be very complicated, race plays a role in who gets penalized for drug use, health costs will increase if drugs are decriminalized, and the drug war should focus on drug distributors, not drug users. The class also agreed that whether drugs are decriminalized or not, our country should increase our efforts to provide drug education in our schools and to the public.

It has been argued that decriminalization will increase crime rate, most people deny that argument with the idea that crime will decrease simply because drugs will no longer be a crime. From 2010 to 2011, youth arrests fell 20%, led by a 47% decrease in drug offense arrests from 2010. “The largest contributor to this decrease was a drop of 9,000 in youths low-level marijuana possession arrests under a new state law reducing that offense from a misdemeanor to an infraction” (Males, 2012). People against drugs believe that the decriminalization of drugs will

result in more crimes, even if possessing drugs is no longer a criminal act. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “in 2004, 17% of state prisoners and 18% of federal inmates said they committed their current offense to obtain money for drugs” (BJS, 2004). Obviously, the decriminalization of drugs will reduce drug possession crimes, but the issue is whether it will affect the amount of drug related crimes such as drug violence and DUIs.

Another important issue is how the decriminalization of drugs will affect incarceration rates and costs. The same idea applies here, if drugs were no longer illegal, less people will go to prison because people aren't going to jail for drug possession. In 2011, 48% of inmates in federal prison were serving time for drug offenses (BJS, 2011). If drugs were not illegal in 2011, incarceration costs would have been nearly half of what it was. The other side can argue that if drugs were not illegal, incarceration costs would increase due to more people using drugs and committing crimes. Although not all users commit crimes and not all criminals use drugs, it is known that drugs have an effect on the users thought processes and behavior, and there is a correlation between drug use and crime rate (NCADD, 2016). “Approximately 60% of individuals arrested for most types of crimes test positive for illegal drugs at arrest” (NCADD, 2016).

Rate of drug use is a vital issue in regards to decriminalizing drugs. A survey in 2013 revealed approximately 24.6 million Americans had used illicit drugs in the past month (NIDA, 2013). People for the decriminalization of drugs can claim using drugs is not a difficult task, and the people who want to use drugs are already using them. They can argue if drugs are decriminalized, drug use may increase initially, but in the long run, it will decrease like it did in Portugal (DPA, 2015). Anti-decriminalization side states if the risk of going to jail is eliminated, overall use will increase and may lead to an increase in addiction as well. A study revealed that

5-6% of people who have recently begun using cocaine will become long-term users (O'Brien, 2005). Some think that the only factor holding back people from using certain drugs is the risk and fear of getting caught. By removing that risk by decriminalization, it shows that drugs are acceptable and people will be more likely to use drugs.

Somewhat similar to crime rate, whether decriminalization has an effect on public safety is very important. The pro-decriminalization side will argue that using drugs in one's home won't endanger anyone, and public safety is not a concern. The other side can argue that if decriminalized, not every person that uses drugs will use them safely in their home. People in public will be using them which will increase the amount of DUIs, and will also increase the amount of violent crimes. "About 23 percent of violent crimes and property crimes were committed by people who tested positive for at least one of 10 illegal drugs" (Join Together, 2012).

In addition to the overall safety of the public, the overall health is very important. Drugs are known to be unhealthy and bad for the body, but some such as marijuana are also used medicinally. One side may argue that if drugs are decriminalized, it will provide a safer way to use drugs. For example, Ireland is planning to provide "safe rooms" for heroin users to use drugs under safe supervision (Hanna, 2015). Irish users will be able to bring their drugs to these centers and inject under medical supervision using clean needles. Switzerland used the same approach in 1987, when they allowed illegal drug sale and use in Platzspitz Park where health officials provided clean syringes (Cohen, 1992). Originally an effort to help the drug problem in Italy, "[Platzspitz] turned into a grotesque tourist attraction of 20,000 addicts and had to be shut down before it infected the entire city of Zurich" (Califano, 2007). Whether or not public health can be

protected from drugs with safe practices and good intentions is one issue, but solving it is useless if the use of drugs themselves is not safe enough for good public health.

Whether or not decriminalization will have an impact on our economy is very hard to determine because of the many factors that play into economics. Pro-decriminalization supporters will argue that the country will save money on incarceration, prohibition costs, and will gain revenue from drug-related fines. “A 2013 report from the ACLU found it cost the United States around \$3.6 billion to enforce marijuana laws in 2010 alone, but it might have been as high as \$6 billion, if some external factors are included,” (Benson, 2015). Our economy is greatly influenced by the underground economy known as the Black Market. Decriminalization will continue to provide the drug cartels will power and funds since the sale would still be illegal. The only way to have a chance at eliminating the black market would be to legalize drugs, but legalization is not the issue under consideration. Legalizing drugs will create much higher revenue than decriminalization, due to the ability to tax and sell legally. That being said, it is argued that the revenue from legalization (and, in turn, decriminalization) will not cover the costs associated with them, based on our knowledge of alcohol and tobacco (Mineta, 2016). “Federal excise taxes collected on alcohol in 2002 totaled \$8.3 billion, which is only 4.5 percent of the \$184 billion in alcohol-related costs, such as lost productivity and increased health care spending” (Mineta, 2016).

In conclusion, there are many issues to discuss when considering drug decriminalization. All of which need to be solved in order to decide if it is right to decriminalize the use of all recreational drugs for adults. These issues are very complex and will require a lot of discussion and regulation to resolve them. We can either decide to maintain our current status in efforts to

protect the country, or we can decide to decriminalize drugs and start putting efforts towards constructing a system that solves these issues and benefits the overall state of our country.

Part 2

When discussing the decriminalization of drugs, there are many questions that need to be asked. These issues will almost always open other questions to be answered, which will then need to be solved themselves. At first, I supported the decriminalization of drugs, being a responsible marijuana smoker and college finance major, I thought it could benefit the economy if everyone used them as responsibly as I did. But after weeks of research, discovering the points of both sides of every issue, I have taken back my original position. I have learned through research that there is a large web of related issues that stem from drugs in the U.S., and several of those issues will become much larger if drugs are decriminalized. The use of drugs- although the act has grown to be almost a social norm in some communities- is too dangerous to decriminalize. Decriminalization will lead to an overall decrease in public safety and public health, and drug use will become a more prominent issue in every community.

Most people think people who are under the influence of drugs are unpredictable, because of all the effects that they have on a user's mind and actions. There are four classes of psychoactive drugs: sedatives, opiates, stimulants, and hallucinogens (Rossi, 2015). These classes produce separate effects on the user, each which result in different dangers to the public. For example, sedatives are drugs that produce calming effects, and at higher doses, drowsiness and sleep (Rossi, 2015). If drugs are decriminalized, I would constantly be stressed about the

possibility of a driver falling asleep at the wheel due to sedative consumption. While the risk of driver's falling asleep is already present, we should take actions to decrease it, not enhance it.

Not only do drugs affect the user's mental state, studies show that people who have used drugs are likely to commit a crime in order to get money for drugs. "In 2002 about a quarter of convicted property and drug offenders in local jails had committed their crimes to get money for drugs" (BJS, 2002). Drugs are a cause, as well as a motive, for criminal acts which endanger the innocent people around them. Drug crime is a very serious issue that this country has been fighting for years, against the cartels mainly based in Mexico. According to Jason Breslow, "The Mexican government released new data showing that between 2007 and 2014- a period that accounts for some of the bloodiest years of the nation's war against drug cartels- more than 164,000 people were victims of homicide" (Breslow, 2015). If we decriminalize drugs, it will allow the cartels to branch into the United States more than they already have, which poses a huge threat to our country.

A portion of public safety is the protection against crimes and violence, both of which would increase with the decriminalization of drugs. "An average of 71 percent of men arrested in 10 U.S. metropolitan areas in 2011 tested positive for an illegal substance when they were taken into custody" (Join Together, 2012). While drugs may not be the only cause of people committing crimes, when taking drugs, people are more likely to think the crime should be committed or are blinded of the repercussions of the crime by the effects of the drug. A large portion of crimes involving violence were also linked to drug use. "About 23 percent of violent crimes and property crimes were committed by people who tested positive for at least one of 10 illegal drugs" (Join Together, 2012). Some argue that the violence from drug crimes are a result of prohibition, since violence is the only means for resolving disputes (DPA, 2016). I agree with

that statement, but decriminalization will not solve the issue of drug violence, it will only worsen it. It will worsen because the sale and purchase of drugs will still be illegal, so violence will remain the main basis of dispute solution.

When discussing decriminalization of drugs and drug crimes, the drug cartel is an immediate and large issue to discuss. According to the Executive Director of the United Nations Office “Drug trafficking and the violence committed by its associated organized crime is the biggest threat to public safety in the Americas” (Costa, 2008). Upon first thought, decriminalization seems like a good idea to help fight the cartel and win the drug war, however it will only help them. Since the sale of drugs will still be illegal if drugs are decriminalized for recreational use, the drugs will still need to be obtained illegally. “Mexican Transitional Criminal Organizations will continue to dominate the trafficking of heroin, methamphetamine, cocaine, and marijuana throughout the United States” (DEA, cited on judicialwatch.org, 2015). Since the sale is illegal, all of the drugs being used could be coming from our biggest threat, the cartels. I feel decriminalization is practically an invitation for the cartels to raise their influence in the United States.

Many people argue that drug use should be addressed as a public health issue, and seeing misusers as patients with a mental health issue instead of a criminal. Drugs themselves are the health danger. “Drugs are not dangerous because they are illegal, they are illegal because they are dangerous” (Califano, 2007). Drugs are not always dangerous if used correctly, but there are many factors when using drugs to make sure they are being used safely (DrugWise, 2015). Certain drugs can be highly addictive, due to the negative affects a user experiences after the drug wears off, known as a “comedown”. “In a comedown [feel-good neurotransmitters] fall to levels that can make the user feel anxious, depressed, paranoid, tired, and experience dizzy

spells” (DrugWise, 2016). An addiction forms when the person uses more drugs to get rid of the negative feeling associated with becoming sober.

Another danger that drugs contain is a lack of quality control. Due to the fact that the drugs are illegal, drugs purchased are not regulated by any safety conditions, because none are enforced. The potency of the drug could be unexpected, leading to an overdose.

The QOV is targeted for recreational use for adults, however, I believe that we will not be able to protect our children from drugs if decriminalized. It is argued that decriminalization will not lead to an increase of youth drug use, but the same was said for alcohol and cigarettes. “Teenage smoking and drinking are widespread in the U.S., United Kingdom, and Europe” (Califano, 2007). Youths today not only smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol, but they also already use illegal recreational drugs. “This survey of more than 46,000 teens... showed that 13% of 8th graders, 30% of 10th graders, and 40% of 12th graders say they have used a drug at least once in the past year” (Bellum, 2013). It is important that our youth stays away from these harmful drugs, because the teen years are very important for brain development. “Substance abuse affects teens brain development by creating problems with memory, interfering with neurotransmitters and damaging connections within the brain, inhibiting development of perceptual abilities” and other various issues (Addiction Center, 2016).

The solution to a lot of the issues at hand is not the decriminalization of drugs, but the education of them. There are several programs that are already taking initiative to educate America of the dangers of drugs and their effects on the users mind, body, and life. These programs do not necessarily decrease use, but should decrease misuse if instituted correctly. Educating people on why drugs should not be used is a common effort to lower usage rate, but I think educating people on the proper and safe way to use drugs is also necessary. Although drugs

are illegal and some may see that approach as an encouragement to use, the people that end up using drugs will have a better understanding of how they can use them safely. I also believe there should be commercials against the use of drugs, similar to the current campaigns against smoking cigarettes.

After all the research and discussion on this topic, I believe we should not decriminalize drugs, as it will negatively affect our country's public health and safety. Decriminalization will only feed power to the cartels, cause more crimes and interfere with the well-being of drug users, people who don't use drugs, and the children of America. Through effective education, we can battle today's drug problem and hopefully solve the issue before it gets out of hand.

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