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TITLE: Tougher drug laws only scratch the surface of the problem

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A campaign is being waged by the federal and NSW governments to strengthen drug laws, particularly those concerning cannabis, in what is being portrayed as an attempt to deal with burgeoning mental health problems. But as a report by the Australia Institute shows, strict drug laws are no solution to the dilemma posed by mental illness and illicit drugs.

The report found that drug strategies should be treatment-orientated so that to ease the punitive burden on users we need to discourage people from using drugs and provide those who do with effective treatment. It also found that drug law enforcement is incapable of putting a significant dent in illicit drug markets, particularly when compared to the likely patterns of drug use and harm under the treatment-focused alternatives.

The Australian National Council on Drugs, the main advisory body to the Federal Government on drug policy, has responded by pointing out that there has been a decline in illicit drug use in recent years, and that heroin use and heroin overdoses have dropped dramatically since the late 1990s.

Have the National Drug Strategy and the efforts of the police made significant inroads into the patterns of drug use and drug harm? Only the most radical anti-prohibitionist would deny that there are many positive aspects of the strategy. Its harm reduction components, like the needle exchange and methadone maintenance programs, have saved lives, reduced crime and decreased the social costs of illicit drugs.

The negative side of the strategy lies in the continuing over-reliance on law enforcement and the refusal of governments to trial more innovative harm reduction initiatives, such as heroin prescription and an expansion of safe injecting rooms.

Studies have been unable to find a statistical link between police drug seizures and street-level availability and prices. The only exception is the Australian heroin drought that began in 2001, which the Federal Government and others claim was a product of drug law enforcement, which the evidence shows is incorrect. It appears the primary cause of the heroin drought was a commercial decision by South-East Asian drug syndicates to switch from supplying heroin to methamphetamines. Three crucial facts support this conclusion.

First, while seizures of methamphetamines have increased significantly in recent years, their availability has also increased dramatically, along with the associated social costs, so much so that the scale of the methamphetamine problem now appears to be commensurate with the heroin crisis of the late 1990s.

Recent data indicate that amphetamine psychosis has increased by more than 60 per cent in the past four years, hardly a statistic that supports upbeat assessments of the illicit drug situation.

Second, heroin production in Burma, the source of almost all of Australia's heroin, has dropped by about 80 per cent since the late 1990s, and nobody seriously suggests that Australia's law enforcement efforts are a major cause of this decline.

Finally, police intelligence indicates that the organisations supplying methamphetamines from Asia are the same groups involved in the heroin trade. This raises the question: if drug law enforcement was the main cause of the drop in heroin, why has it failed to stop the flood of methamphetamines coming through the same channels?

The solution is not to abandon drug law enforcement. Yet, there needs to be a dramatic shift in emphasis so that treatment and prevention are seen as the core elements of our response to illicit drug problems.

While the evidence clearly shows that treatment is the most cost-effective method of dealing with drug problems - returning savings of up to \$12 on every dollar invested - around 80 per cent of government funding for illicit drugs is directed towards law enforcement. This division of resources is illogical and inefficient.

And it is not just a case of expanding or reallocating funding. Governments need to accept that, irrespective of how hard we try, people will always take drugs. Once we accept this reality, the best we can do is make using safer. To do this, controversial strategies like heroin prescription and pill testing will have to be trialled.

Being "tough on drugs" is a case of easy politics, but lazy policy. Drug abuse will never be eliminated, however, we can do better than we are now.

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