

Homeland Security

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War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration

About four decades ago, the United States declared a war on drugs to reduce the prevalence of drug abuse in the country and to counter the major impacts associated with substance abuse. Strategies such as collaborating with the criminal justice system and use of traditional strategies such as arrests, drug seizure, and incarceration have been employed in the fight against drugs. Unfortunately, years later, the war on drugs has been termed a total failure; and in fact, has contributed to a bigger problem in the country. In particular, the war on drugs has significantly contributed to mass incarceration, especially targeting minority groups such as Blacks and Latinos. For instance, in 2012, there were at least 1.5 million drug arrests, with more than 80 percent being arrested for possession of drugs only. Additionally, more than 50 percent of inmates in federal prisons are incarcerated in relation to drug law. Along with that, people of color are more likely to be stopped, searched, arrested, convicted, and sentenced in relation to drug law (Drug Policy Alliance, 2014). More specifically, to create a better understanding of the impact of war on drugs on mass incarceration for minority groups, the African American community comprise of 13 percent of the U.S. population but represent at least one-third of incarcerated individuals in relation to drug law violations. Consistently, considering the war on drugs and its contribution to mass incarceration, we explore other areas, in particular, Europe to find out whether the region faces the same issue or it is only special to the United States. Secondly, we explore methods, strategies, technologies, resources, or policies utilized in Europe that can be helpful to the problem of war on drugs and mass incarceration.

War on Drugs and Mass Incarceration in Europe

Drugs are a complex social and health problem affecting millions of people all over the world, with Europe included. Additionally, the war on drugs has not only been launched in the United States and many countries in Europe have been fighting drugs for decades. In the European Union, statistics indicate that more than 92 million individuals aged between 15 and 64 years have tried to use illicit drugs in their lives (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2018)). Drug use in the European Union is more highly prevalent among males than females. Another notable thing about substance abuse in the European region is that cannabis remains one of the widely used illicit drugs and has dominated the European market. Several laws have been designed to fight the prevalence of drug abuse in the European region, some of them going back several decades. For instance, the United Kingdom started drug prohibition during the First World War. According to Wheeler (2013), during this time, possession, distribution, and sale of cocaine and opium were made illegal. By 1920, Cannabis was added into the list inconsistent with international treaties. Ideally, the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act was key legislation, which was dedicated to the war on drugs. The Act was designed to prevent the misuse of controlled drugs and achieved this by imposing criminal justice regulations.

Consistently, similar to the United States, the war on drugs in Europe has contributed to mass incarceration in the region. For example, according to the Swansea University (2014), over the last two decades, the prison population in the United Kingdom doubled, which also had the second highest number in Western Europe after Spain. Out of the total number of sentences, 17 percent were related to drugs. Another country that was on the same script as the United States was Portugal. Virtually, when the country declared the war on drugs, the result was similar to what the United States is experiencing today – mass incarceration related to drugs.

Strategies, Technologies, Resources, or Policies Utilized in Europe that can Help in the War on Drugs Fight and Reduce Mass Incarceration

After decades of global prohibition, drugs are now more readily available, cheaper, and widely used. Organized criminals and unregulated dealers have become better established, an exercise that has resulted in undermined public health and human rights, increased crime, and conflict. Consistently, one notable outcome that seems to undermine the war on drugs is the high rate of mass incarceration targeting certain groups, especially in the United States. Efforts to resolve the issue of war on drugs and mass incarceration has seen several strategies and methods developed to resolve the problem. In Europe, especially in the United Kingdom, the war on drugs was contrary to that of the United States as Wheeler (2013) identified. The country emphasized treatment instead of punishment of drug users where drugs such as heroin were prescribed to addicts on the National Health Service. Unfortunately, the strategy did not work as the prevalence of drug use continued to increase. In light of this, there have been proposals to legalize drugs and regulate drug markets like is the case of alcohol or tobacco. The United Kingdom notwithstanding, there are other European countries that have legalized drugs such as marijuana in a bid to win the war on drugs without leading to mass incarceration. For instance, the Netherlands decriminalized cannabis and even allowed its sale in coffee shops in 2013 (Korf, 2019). The move was meant to counter illegal cannabis cultivation and use and to counter the issue of mass incarceration in relation to drug laws. Nonetheless, it is also important to note that the sale of cannabis in the Netherlands is supposed to be done discreetly and only sold to Dutch nationals. While the move is an indicator of a growing tolerance for marijuana use in the country, it cannot be termed effective in reducing incarceration because the police have the power to seize cannabis and prosecute individuals found in possession of more than 5g.

Another country that has made major steps in the war on drugs and mass incarceration is Portugal. Virtually, before Portugal changed its strategy, the country was under the grip of heroin addiction among other drugs. For the period before the government changed tactics, they introduced harsh policies through the criminal justice system. By the late 1990s, at least half of the prison's population were in for drug-related offenses. The government realized that nothing was working and by 2001, Portugal took a major step by decriminalizing the consumption of all drugs. According to Cabral (2017), under the Portuguese plan, people caught dealing with and trafficking drugs were still subjected to fines and jail terms based on the degree of crime. However, the law changed for people found possessing small quantities of drugs for personal use. Concerns over the misuse of drugs on personal use were also addressed. As Cabral highlights, consumption, acquisition, and possession of drugs for the personal use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances are regulated through administrative fine. In particular, individuals are allowed certain maximum daily consumptions of personal use of narcotic and psychotropic substances. Failure to adhere to the rules, individuals' faces fines that are light in nature. Along with that, there are other additional penalties such as banning individuals from certain professional activities and certain places. If individuals are found to have an addiction problem, they are recommended to a medical expert to help with the problem. Evidently, in Portugal, rehabilitation is preferred as opposed to the prosecution of cases.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Evidently, the war on drugs and the resulting mass incarceration is not unique to the United States. In a similar way that the United States prefers to prosecute drug offenders, this is similar in a majority of European countries. Additionally, while there have been strategies to address the issues, these solutions have not yielded much result. For instance, in the Netherlands,

although cannabis is legalized, the police have the power to arrest and seize cannabis if individuals are found to be in possession of more than the recommended amount of personal use. Besides, the sale of cannabis in coffee shops is not supposed to be in the open. Another thing, the only drug that has been legalized is cannabis, while some of the other drugs such as heroin and cocaine remain illegal. In this case, the Netherlands strategies/ methods are not effective. On the other hand, the Portuguese model has been effective for several years now and the United States should consider adopting the model. By doing this, the country will view drugs as a health problem that needs to be addressed through a rehabilitative stance instead of through the criminal justice system.

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