

# Best Drug Policy Is Straight Ahead

By Marsha Rosenbaum

**T**HE CLINTON administration has just unveiled a major plan to reduce drug use by half by the year 2007. It calls for more drug education for children and tighter security at our borders to stem the supply of drugs. Indeed, as part of that effort, Bill Clinton seems all but certain to certify Mexico's continuing cooperation to curb the export of drugs into this country.

Clinton's call to arms is a natural response to our country's ongoing struggle with drug use. The problem is that we're already trying this — and look at the results.

The federal drug-control budget exceeds \$17 billion per year. Add state and local budgets to fight drugs, and the figure may be nearly five times larger. Two-thirds of this money is used for interdiction, stopping drugs from entering the country, and enforcement — arresting, trying and imprisoning users. So far (perhaps because the black market generates \$64 billion per year), this effort has been a dismal failure.

In fact, since President Ronald Reagan began escalating the "war on drugs," worldwide production of opium has expanded. The price of heroin has dropped and its purity has increased steadily. We cannot seem

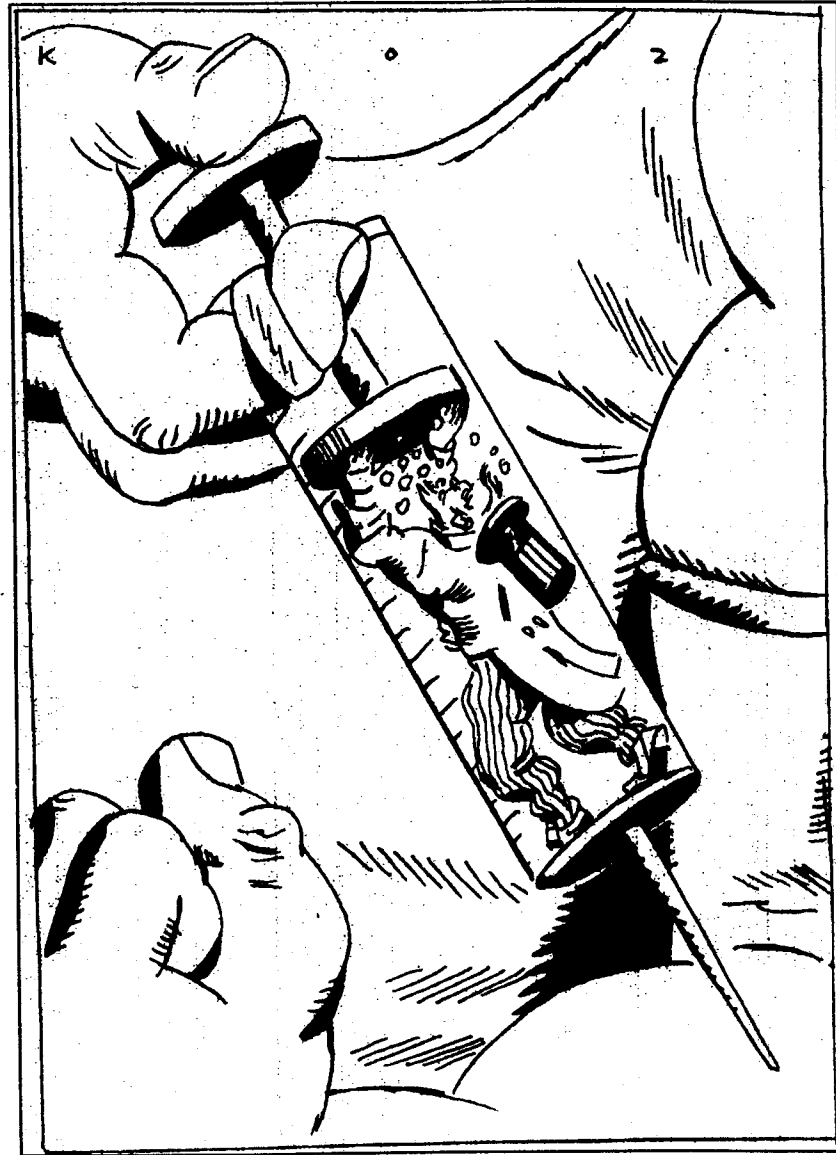
to make a dent in the supply, hence availability, of heroin.

Our efforts to reduce the demand for drugs have fared no better than our efforts to reduce drug supplies. Today's young adults were in grade school when Nancy Reagan began telling them to "just say no." Over and over, in the schools and on television, they have been warned about drugs' dangers. Yet for nearly a decade now, drug use among adolescents has been rising. According to government statistics, less than 1 percent have ever tried heroin, but those federal researchers familiar with drug-use patterns believe its use among young people is increasing.

More drug education, of the sort existing already, cannot be expected to reverse these trends. Indeed, study after study shows that current drug education programs have no effect on drug use whatsoever. Quite simply, they lack credibility. Much of their focus is on marijuana, which they overly demonize, hoping it will frighten young people away from experimentation. Half of American teenagers try marijuana anyway, and once they learn the dire warnings are not true, they begin to mistrust everything about drugs that adults tell them.

And why shouldn't they? Why

— *Continued on Next Page*



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# Shaping the Best Drug Policy

— *Continued from Preceding Page*

should they listen at all if they can't believe that what we tell them is true?

The truth about heroin is that it is much more dangerous than marijuana. Anyone who injects heroin with a needle that was used previously by others risks contracting a deadly infection such as hepatitis or HIV.

Anyone who uses heroin steadily for several weeks running, whether it is injected, smoked or

snorted, will begin developing physical dependence and face withdrawal symptoms if he stops using it. People who use heroin occasionally do not become addicted. But, compared to the heroin addict, the occasional heroin user has not developed tolerance to the drug. He is at much greater risk of experiencing a fatal overdose. Still, because heroin is illegal, unregulated and uncontrolled, even the most experienced user cannot know the potency contained in a batch of unlabeled white powder.

These are the kinds of warnings we should be giving young people about heroin. But first we have to get them to listen by convincing them they can trust us to tell the truth. They must also trust that they can come to us in an emergency.

"Zero tolerance" is another method for deterring young people from experimentation. But it has meant that too many have died because their friends were afraid of calling parents or other authorities for help. Terrified of being detected themselves, teenagers in Plano, Texas, for example, fled the scene, leaving one boy to choke on his own vomit and die.

Like it or not, we cannot seal our borders or completely eliminate demand for drugs, no matter how much money the government is willing to spend. Moral indignation will not change that reality. A more pragmatic approach would be to learn to live with drugs, as we do with alcohol, and to focus on the reduction of drug-related harm.

Our first priority ought to be gaining the trust of young people. We ought to offer thorough, scientifically grounded education that allows them to learn all they can about drugs, alcohol and any other substances they ingest. Young people will ultimately make their own decisions about drug use, and when they do, they ought to have enough accurate information — from sources they trust — to insure their own safety and the safety of others.



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