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Are We Really Winning The War on Drugs?

By *Marsha Rosenbaum*

THE OFFICE of National Drug Control Policy unveiled its "new" \$19 billion strategy yesterday. Director Gen. Barry McCaffrey, our drug "czar," claims that we have made "substantial progress" and that "for those who say this is a war, we are winning."

Really? By what measure?

After spending upward of \$250 billion since 1980 to get illegal drugs off the streets and away from children, hard drugs are coming into the country and hitting the streets just as much as ever. Like prices of other abundant products, prices of heroin and cocaine are at record lows. In 1981, a gram of uncut heroin would have cost \$1,200. Today the price has plummeted to just \$318. The drop in the price of cocaine is also dramatic, down from \$191 per gram at the beginning of the drug war to the bargain price of \$44 today.

And it's strong stuff, with heroin 25 percent pure (compared with 5 percent in 1981), and cocaine at 70 percent pure (compared with 40 percent in 1981). So much for interdiction.

Deaths associated with illegal drug use

have increased 44 percent (to nearly 16,000 a year) since the War on Drugs began in 1980. It is impossible to know the strength of "white powder" substances, such as heroin and cocaine, since they hit the street unlabeled. Heroin overdose fatalities have climbed steadily among adults and teenagers, and continue to shock communities all over the country, including urban centers, rural areas and suburban enclaves.

The AIDS epidemic is still with us, with intravenous drug users constituting half of new cases. Hepatitis C, which causes liver failure, is also contracted through sharing syringes. This virus is spreading so rapidly that some experts say it will make HIV look like small potatoes.

A majority (57 percent) of men and women seeking treatment are turned away due to a lack of facilities in their area or prohibitive costs. Methadone maintenance, proven as the most effective treatment, is wrought with restrictive regulations and terribly underfunded, making access problematic. This leaves street addicts just that, on the street, having to resort to crime to support their habits and at risk for contracting drug-related illnesses such as HIV and Hepatitis C.

Our prisons are bulging, with 400,000 Americans currently serving time for drug-law violations. Some 700,000 individuals were arrested last year for marijuana offenses — a full 85 percent of them for simple possession. Communities of color have been especially devastated by escalating arrests, disproportionate convictions and long mandatory sentences. One in 3 young black men in America are currently under some form of criminal justice supervision.

That's the bad news. I suppose that as the mother of a teenager I should be heartened by McCaffrey's trumpeting a 13 percent decline in youth drug use. I watch these numbers very carefully, and surveys indicate that drug use among teens has gone up and down over the past 20 years. Still, after two decades of telling them to "just say no," 80 percent admit to experimenting with alcohol and other drugs before they graduate from high school. Teenagers have no trouble procuring a range of substances, with 90 percent of high school seniors reporting that marijuana is "fairly or very easy" to get.

Nearly 40 percent know where to find Ecstasy (a euphoric, "feel-good" drug used primarily at all-night dance parties known as Raves), almost half can get LSD, and

one third say they know where to buy heroin. So much for keeping drugs out of the hands of kids.

Our priorities are misplaced. Current federal policy, this year and for the past 20 years, uses two-thirds of its resources to try to keep drugs out of the country and to arrest and incarcerate users. This strategy misses the point. Substance abuse is no more a criminal justice issue than diabetes or obesity or acne.

We should offer compassion and treatment to those with drug problems, and cease arresting those whose only offense is personal use. And we should do everything we can to honestly educate our children about drugs, while providing them with meaningful activities that keep them engaged in school and off the streets.

Ultimately, U.S. drug policy needs a new bottom line, one that focuses on promoting health and reducing illness, death and suffering.

Marsha Rosenbaum, Ph.D., is the director of the Lindesmith Center-West (www.lindesmith.org), a drug policy institute in San Francisco.

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