August Newsletter

GOP Senate Covid Package Fails to Help Incarcerated People

Senate Republicans have unveiled their trillion-dollar stimulus package, the HEALS Act – which Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has said will likely represent lawmakers’ last major legislative response to the pandemic.

The Act fails to reduce the number of people incarcerated in institutions and settings that cannot possibly follow CDC directives on safe practices for reducing risk of COVID-19 transmission, and so are putting people at unnecessary risk of harm.

In response, Maritza Perez, Director of the Office of National Affairs for DPA, said:

“The Senate’s latest proposal is woefully inadequate and fails to address the plight of incarcerated people, which as the nation has become all too familiar with, have borne the brunt of this crisis without the same protections the rest of us enjoy – such as basic sanitation and the ability to social distance. And as we warned, the result has been devastating and growing more dire by the second with more than 100,000 incarcerated people having been infected and at least 802 incarcerated individuals and correctional officers dead.”

Read Maritza’s full statement

New CDC Data Suggests Overdose Deaths Increased in 2019

New preliminary data from the CDC shows an increase in drug overdose deaths in 2019. Nationwide, there was an estimated annual rise of almost 5% in drug
overdose deaths in 2019, with some states predicting significantly higher figures.

Overdose deaths have also surged in 2020, in part due to COVID-19 leading to the closure of treatment and harm reduction services, although definitive data on this has yet to be released.

Sheila Vakharia, PhD, Deputy Director of the Department of Research and Academic Engagement for DPA, released the following statement:

“While the increase in overdose deaths in the U.S. in 2019 is devastating, it is not at all surprising, and there is reason to believe that these deaths will continue to climb in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has increased isolation, disrupted the drug supply and reduced access to harm reduction and treatment supports.

Last year, as legislators tried to do a victory lap over a 4.5% decrease in overdose deaths from the year prior, we warned that the data did not account for the fact that there were states where overdoses continued to climb, nor did data make clear the racial and other demographic discrepancies or the troubling increases in stimulant overdoses in recent years. This is still true today. Now, not only are these communities hit even harder by increased overdose deaths, but they have also been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, further revealing the health inequities in the system.”

DPA has developed a set of COVID-19 drug policy recommendations to protect public health and reduce overdose deaths. These include ending criminal penalties for drug possession, improving access to substance use disorder treatment and harm reduction services, allowing overdose prevention sites to open legally, funding syringe exchange and naloxone access, and releasing people imprisoned for drug offenses – especially possession and other low-level offenses.

Read DPA’s full COVID-19 policy recommendations.

"Whatever They Do, I'm Her Comfort, I'm Her Protector": Movement for Family Power Releases New Report on the Child Welfare and Foster System

A new report by Movement for Family Power, one of DPA’s funded partners, attempts to contribute to the small but growing body of literature that questions the foster system’s intervention into the lives of parents who use drugs, particularly low income white and Black, American Indian, and Latinx parents.
The child welfare and foster system holds perhaps the greatest power a state can exercise over its people: the power to forcibly take children away from parents and permanently sever parent-child relationships. However, the foster system has been subject to surprisingly little scrutiny of its wide latitude to surveil and control families. This is made all the more remarkable by the fact that the foster system almost exclusively monitors the parenting of society’s most marginalized people.

Despite the similar rates of drug use amongst white and non-white drug users, and between drug users in different socioeconomic classes, the majority of interventions by the child welfare system revolve around the drug use of parents living in poverty, and particularly low income Black and Brown mothers.

Not one study has been able to conclusively establish a causal link between drug use and child maltreatment. In contrast, several studies have documented the harm of foster care. There is compelling evidence that the policy and practice that has resulted is more toxic to children, parents, and families than the alleged effects of drug use on pregnancy and parenting.

Read the report.

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DPA Clips, Podcasts, and Stories

**FEATURED POST: #FreeThemNow**
Patrick Jones should be alive today. Patrick Jones was the first person to die of COVID-19 in federal prison. Throughout the entirety of his 13 year sentence for a drug charge, he was unable to see his son. Patrick Jones should have had the chance to see his son again.

People in prisons are among the most at-risk for COVID-19. For Jones, an unjust mandatory minimum sentence ended up being a death sentence. Take action here to #FreeThemNow.

Follow DPA on Instagram.

DPA's Podcast, Drugs & Stuff: Police Militarization is Not Normal

In the latest episode of DPA's podcast, Drugs & Stuff, Emily Kaltenbach – Senior Director of DPA's Municipal Drug Strategies and New Mexico State Director – discusses how we came to have militarized police forces.

In her own community in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Emily sees police with assault rifles, submachine guns, grenade launchers, and even tanks. To help us understand the far-reaching implications of the presence of this military equipment, Emily joined us to explain the policy, practices, and
history behind the militarization of police, and how deeply embedded it is as a tactic of fighting the failed drug war. As an expert in local-level reform, she lays out the key reform initiatives necessary to demilitarize police and ensure real public safety.

Listen now on our website or on your favorite podcast streaming platforms. The podcast’s full back catalog can be found here.

*Listen to the latest episode here.*

**To End Police Violence, We Must End the War on Drugs**

DPA's Sophie Dowdy made the case that ending the drug war is essential for ending police violence in a thought-provoking op-ed on DPA's new Medium account.

“As we rise up against injustice, many have started to also think about how to build a better future, where communities have found new and better ways to keep each other safe, and the violence of policing is a thing of the past. As we do so, we must think about ending the drug war as a critical component of ending police violence."

Dowdy argues, as DPA has many times said before, that the perception of drug use is often used as a cover for police brutality, a perception that is disproportionately applied to people of color.

“Over and over again, we have seen drugs used as pretext to enact racialized violence. As Derek Chauvin knelt with his knee on George Floyd’s neck, one of the other officers on the scene turned to the onlookers and said ‘don’t do drugs, kids.’ Floyd’s drug use was used not only to try to absolve the officers involved, but also to mark him as implicitly deserving of death.”

As she contends, it's time to “defund and dismantle the institutions that criminalize drug use and build alternatives that uphold the dignity and autonomy of people who use drugs... people have already imagined and are enacting different ways of responding to drug use that aren’t punitive but that instead embody values of safety, community, care, and justice.”
Read the full article here.

COVID-19 & drug policy: a new discussion series from the Drug Policy Alliance

Decarceration
May 7

Reentry
May 20

Treatment
Jun 11

Health & Harm Reduction
Jun 25

Informal & gig economies
Jul 9

Safe supply & legal regulation
Jul 23

Drug war policing & surveillance
Augs 6

How does COVID-19 exacerbate the pre-existing conditions of the drug war? Join us for an online discussion series. Follow @DrugPolicyOrg for details.

DPA has been hosting a series of online discussions about COVID-19 and drug policy. To register for the last discussion in our series, click here.
DPA is honored to have Arnold Trebach as part of our 20 year history: he founded the Drug Policy Foundation, which later merged with the Lindesmith Center to form DPA. He urged rationality and compassion when most people wanted to escalate the drug war.

RIP Arnold Trebach, Who Helped Make Opposition to the Drug War Respecta...
The American University professor called for "drug peace" at a time when both major parties were committed to ever-escalating violence.
reason.com

Drug Policy in the News

Business Insider: Cannabis Activists Say Legalization Is the First Step in Reforming the Police. But Creating an Equitable Industry for Black Entrepreneurs Has Been an Uphill Battle.

Marijuana Moment: GOP Congressman Withdraws Amendment To Block D.C. Psychedelics Decriminalization

Gizmodo: The U.S. Had a Record Number of Overdose Deaths Last Year

Filter: Beneath Tragic New US Overdose Figures, There Are Wide Regional Variations

Marijuana Moment: Congress Should Pass Marijuana Legalization Bill Amid Coronavirus, Coalition Of Justice Groups Urges

TalkingDrugs: The Crisis Behind Bars: Global Policy Responses to COVID-19 in Prisons
Put DPA in your will or estate plan. Find out more about how to join The Ashawna Hailey Planned Giving Society today.

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