



Drug Use—Rehabilitation, Not Jail

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In Gloucester, Massachusetts, drug addicts who turn themselves in at a police station will not be charged but instead are helped toward recovery.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, there was a dramatic increase in drug use in the United States, especially among those under 30. This rise in drug use was celebrated by many, but caused great concern for others. The era is sometimes looked back on as the period of “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll,” where old social norms were challenged and a “do your own thing” spirit took hold. To many of the sixties generation, the use of drugs was a way to free the mind from conventional limits, which was a striking contrast to the conformity-minded years of the 1950s. However, the widespread use of marijuana, pills (uppers and downers), LSD, heroin, and other psychoactive substances struck many other Americans as evidence of a dangerous social breakdown.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon declared a “war on drugs.” With this came an increase in the size of federal drug control agencies. Marijuana became a restricted drug, and mandatory jail sentences were added for drug use. This tougher policy was followed by an extension of the war on drugs during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Between 1980 and 1997, the number of people placed in jail for nonviolent drug use increased from 50,000 to 400,000. Large sums of federal money were used

in the various drug control programs. Many of these moved from police action to more military-type actions. More recently, the entire “war on drugs” approach has been called into question, as data has not supported the efforts to use the legal system as the way to regulate drug use and punish users. Many in the government have concluded that the war on drugs has not worked.

More recently, there has been a shift in focus from drug supply and use to that of drug demand. For example, the police chief of Gloucester, MA, said that the old drug war was lost and over. Instead, he is treating addiction as a disease and not a crime. He said, “Any addict who walks into the police station with the remainder of their drug equipment (needles, etc.) or drugs and asks for help will NOT be charged. Instead we will walk them through the system toward detox and recovery” and send them for treatment “on the spot” (reported in the *New York Times*, January 25, 2016). Since he began this approach, 391 addicts have turned themselves in. It is reported that the program not only has human benefits but economic ones as well. Whereas it cost \$220 to arrest, process, and hold an addict in custody for a single day, it costs only \$55 for the police to send an addict to treatment. Also, the Gloucester community has been supportive with in-kind donations to the program.

This new approach in treating drug addiction is not limited to Gloucester. At least 56 police departments in 17 states—from Orlando, Florida, to Port Angeles, Washington—have started similar programs, with about twice that number preparing to do so. One important aspect is for treatment programs to work with the police departments, which is happening in Gloucester and elsewhere.

Thought Question: What are the promises and problems of focusing on demand rather than supply in relation to drug use?