

Getting rid of drug-related crime

By Jeff Rigenbach

Atty. Gen. Edwin Meese announced on May 1 that drug enforcement will be the Reagan administration's No. 1 law enforcement priority for the remainder of the President's second term. This is lamentable, for Reagan has already increased drug enforcement spending by more than 75 percent. Any further escalation of such enforcement efforts is almost certain to accomplish exactly the opposite of its intended goal and lead to an increase, rather than a decrease, in street crime in our cities.

The administration's theory, which is widely shared by law enforcement professionals, is that drug use causes crime. Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support this view. There is, on the other hand, considerable evidence for the hypothesis that drug laws cause crime, and for the related hypothesis that the more assiduously these laws are enforced, the more crime there is as a result.

Most drug-related crime is of two kinds: murders and assaults committed by dealers against their competitors in an effort to monopolize the market, and property crimes committed by users in an effort to finance their habits.

The first of these types of crimes is obviously a consequence of our drug laws. When alcoholic beverages were prohibited nationwide during the 1920s, gangsters like Al Capone took over the market and violent crimes among dealers in liquor were commonplace. Now that alcohol is sold legally by

legitimate businesses, there are no longer shootouts among competitors.

The second type of drug-related crime—property crime committed to raise money to buy drugs—is also caused by our drug laws, not by the drugs themselves. Drug users have to resort to theft because the price of drugs is so high. The price is so high because the drugs are illegal.

In 1972, for example, the price of legal heroin in England was 4 cents per grain, and an average habit cost an addict less than \$1 a day to maintain. In New York City in 1972, illegal heroin cost up to \$90 per grain, and the cost of a daily habit was astronomical. Unsurprisingly, heroin users in New York in that year committed about half a billion dollars worth of crime against their neighbors to support their habits, while the crime committed by addicts in London that year was insignificant.

The more effective the police become at reducing the supply of drugs on the street, the higher the price of the drugs goes, and the greater the incentive for users to commit crimes to obtain them. Little wonder, then, that the famous draconian drug law enacted in New York in the early 1970s was later found to have had no effect on reducing the crime rate in that state. Little wonder that a 1977 Detroit study found that when police cracked down on drug traffic in a community, the crime rate went up, not down, and that when police relaxed enforcement, the crime rate went down, not up.

If drugs cause crime, how is it that we are seeing an increase in drug use at the same time that we are seeing a decline in the crime rate? The answer is that drugs do not cause crime; drug laws do. And the fastest and surest way of getting rid of drug-related crime is therefore to get rid of our drug laws.

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