



4 THE WAR ON DRUGS

Over the last few decades, the drug problem in the United States (and in many other industrialized countries) has become considerably worse. In 1981, there were about 3 million drug addicts in the United States; today there are around 6 million. The number of drug overdose deaths and drug-related homicides has also increased. This is in spite of the fact that the government has spent more and more money in trying to solve the drug problem. The fight against drugs is often referred to as a "war" or "battle," and most experts now believe the battle against drugs has been a failure. They say it has failed because the government has focused on controlling the problem through laws and punishments, rather than through drug education and treatment.

The failure of the law-enforcement approach has led to calls for other approaches to solving the problem, including the decriminalization and the legalization of drugs. Advocates of decriminalization think that drug users should no longer be labeled as serious criminals and that the punishments for drug use should be significantly reduced. Advocates of legalization believe there should be no restriction on drug use at all, and that individuals should be able to buy drugs the same way they buy cigarettes and alcohol today.

Those who are in favor of legalization argue that the current drug laws do more harm than good. They argue that the current laws waste police time because while police officers are busy arresting people for smoking marijuana, they are not doing the work of arresting robbers and murderers. Further, they argue that the high cost of illegal drugs and the enormous amounts of money to be made from drug dealing encourage more serious crimes. For example, many drug users turn to stealing to support their habit and police can sometimes be bribed to



Prohibition

the period (1920–1933) when the sale and consumption of alcohol was illegal in the United States.



After alcohol was decriminalized in the U.S., its consumption increased. Would decriminalizing drugs lead to an increase in drug use?

“look the other way.” Finally, those who support legalization believe that if drugs were legalized, the huge amounts of money currently spent on law enforcement could be used for drug treatment and education, which would drastically reduce drug use.

Those who oppose legalization respond that, if drugs are legalized, drug use and addiction will skyrocket. They point to the experience with alcohol, which was prohibited in the United States in the 1920s. At the end of this period, called **Prohibition**, the consumption of alcohol apparently soared by 350 percent (Bennet 1989). Others feel that the use of drugs is a stepping stone to other crimes – that, for example, the use of marijuana leads to the use of heroin or cocaine, and on to more serious crime. If drug use is stopped, this trend will be prevented.

Another aspect of the debate on whether or not drugs should be legalized involves the question of individual rights. Some people call for legalization because they feel they have the right to take drugs – that it is none of the government’s business. They think that laws governing this behavior are an invasion of individual rights. On the other hand, others argue that the government should try to protect us from harming ourselves.

Finally, there are those who believe that the problem of widespread drug abuse and crime can only be solved when the government attacks the root causes of the problem: poverty, racism and inequality (Currie 1993). They propose that the government should deal with the factors that cause the problem by providing employment for all, increasing the minimum wage, improving health care for the poor, offering paid family leave, and providing affordable housing.

