



Replacing the War on Drugs with a War on Ignorance

CHOOSE
LIFE
OR
CHOOSE
METH

For several decades no one has had to tell school administrators, teachers or law enforcement agencies that graduation rates are falling, crime is on the rise and drug epidemics are driving the numbers. According to one Superior Court Judge: “We’ve been through epidemics. First it was the cocaine epidemic, then the crack cocaine epidemic and now it’s the meth epidemic. And this one is more scary than the other epidemics because meth is more scary of a drug especially in terms of the violence that comes along with it.” But in terms of crime detection, arrest and apprehension you could argue that law enforcement has never done a better job. And you’d be right. Back when the Nixon administration declared a War on Drugs, no one would have imagined that “winning” would result in a ten-fold expansion of our state prison population with a system that is all but crumbling under its own weight with no relief in sight.

A look back into a 1994 article titled: **Basic Facts About the War on Drugs**, by Clifford A. Schaffer is really quite illuminating, if not prophetic, about where we’ve been and where we’re going. In Schaffer’s view, the war on drugs was being waged on three strategic fronts: stopping drug production in other countries, stopping the flow of drugs at the border and arresting drug dealers within our own borders. Let’s see what he had to say.

“We could stop drug production in other countries. On December 28, 1992 ABC Television aired a major special on the drug war in Bolivia which, according to the Bush Administration is our “best hope” for winning the drug war in South America. They concluded decisively that there was no hope and that the war on drug production has already been lost. (That was George H.W. Bush, father of the current President.)By the US Federal Government’s own estimates, the entire United States consumption of illegal drugs could be supplied by approximately one percent of the worldwide drug crop. In their best year, US Drug Enforcement Agents working together with foreign governments seized about one percent of the worldwide drug crop, leaving 99 percent free to supply the U.S.

***We could stop drugs at the border.** No. Any examination of the statistics regarding border interdiction shows quite clearly that border interdiction is an expensive failure. In 1990, the General Accounting Office completed a major study on border interdiction. They reported that border interdiction was a waste of money and that no conceivable increase in funding or effort would make it any better. The best Federal Government evidence has concluded that there is no way to stop, or even greatly reduce, either production of drugs in foreign countries or the smuggling of drugs into the US. ...In fact, all of the Federal Government’s own evidence shows that this is impossible and it is a waste of money to try.*

We could stop the sale of drugs within the United States. *The first question to address is how many drug dealers are there? ...If we use the strict legal definition of a "dealer" then there are somewhere between 12 and 40 million drug dealers in the United States. [However] Most of the prisons and jails in the United States are already far in excess of their planned capacity and correctional institutions in 24 states are under Federal court order to release prisoners. Arresting all of the drug dealers would require construction of at least five new prison beds for every one which now exists, assuming that no new drug dealers came along to fill the gap. There is no credible evidence anywhere that we could stop, or even greatly reduce, the sale of drugs within the United States. In fact, all of the Federal Government's own evidence shows that this is impossible and not only is it a waste of money to try, but it actually does more harm than if we did nothing at all.*

Mr. Schaffer's 1994 assessment of the War on Drugs is then summarized as follows: *"There are currently about 1.5 million people in state and Federal prisons and jails throughout the United States. At the current time, at least 24 states are under Federal court orders to relieve prison overcrowding. There are an estimated thirty to forty million people who have used illegal drugs in the last year. If we imprisoned all of them, we would have to build a prison large enough to hold the combined populations of California, Arizona, and New Mexico. The total cost to imprison them for five years, including the costs of arrest and prosecution would be roughly ten to fifteen trillion dollars, or about ten times the total Federal annual [1994] budget. This does not include the related costs to society which would be caused by the imprisonment of millions of gainfully employed, tax-paying citizens."*

<http://www.druglibrary.org/Schaffer/LIBRARY/basicfax.htm>

The Costs of Unchecked Demand In reviewing current data available from the California ADP website we found that the estimated economic impact in California, for CY 2006 cost to society of alcohol and other drug abuse was over \$44 billion. This estimate takes into consideration loss of productivity, health care costs, prevention and treatment costs, criminal justice costs, and losses due to crime. While drug abuse at \$22.1 billion, cost slightly less than alcohol abuse at \$22.5 billion, the primary substances used rank as follows: Methamphetamine- 35.1%; Alcohol- 19.7% Heroin-15.8%; Marijuana/Hashish-14.4%; Cocaine/Crack -10.7% Other 4.3% And in Fiscal Year (FY) 2006-07, there were 215,602 admissions to various State & Federally funded programs in California. (Source: *Alcohol & Other Drugs* <http://www.adp.cahwnet.gov>)

Drug Courts: Fixing something that has not worked. Today, "the average annual cost of housing an inmate in California is \$34,000. That figure includes the costs of caring for tens of thousands of inmates with chronic medical and mental health problems." (http://realcostofprisons.org/blog/archives/2006/11/prisoners_in_ca.html) Drug courts have provided some relief to the costs and have actually proved to be a real ally for many trying to break the cycle of addiction. And they have paid big dividends. For example: "In California, researchers have recently completed two studies that demonstrate significant cost-benefit savings. Both studies demonstrate

a minimum savings of \$18 million per year through California drug courts. A total of 425,014 **jail days** were avoided, with an averted cost of approximately \$26 million (Judicial Council of California & California Department of Alcohol & Drug Programs, 2002). [In another study:] A total of 227,894 **prison days** were avoided, with an averted cost of approximately \$16 million. (http://www.ndci.org/courtfacts_benefits.html) While drug courts work, they also represent a barometer of where we have failed and that was clearly in preventing drug use in the first place.

Ignorance is the problem there... and here. California is obviously not alone. "Statistics place meth as a major contributor to Idaho's prison population. But one in five Idaho teens see little or no risk in trying methamphetamine once or twice, according to a state survey commissioned by the Idaho Meth Project." "The 2007 Idaho Meth Use & Attitudes Survey, conducted last fall by GfK Roper Public Affairs and Media, quizzed 3,000 teens, 350 18- to 24-year-olds and 400 parents about their views on meth and its prevalence in the state. The results, Meth Project Executive Director Megan Ronk said, are sad but unsurprising: Many teens and young adults see potential benefits and little risk in taking meth, find the drug readily available and have had limited discussions about the drug with their peers or parents... The survey, Ronk said, places Idaho on par with Montana two years ago... "About 38 percent of young adults believe the drug helps you lose weight. And though 80 percent of teens "strongly" disapprove of trying it even once or twice, 25 percent say their friends would not give them a "hard time" if they did. "Looking at how easy it is to acquire. That's a fairly alarming statistic, I would think, especially for parents," Ronk said. "That stresses the importance of having that conversation (with your kids)." (Source: *NCA NEWSFAX FOR YOUR INFORMATION NCA • P.O. Box 6407 • BOISE, ID 83707 • 01/23/2008*)

Who has meaningful conversations with their kids?! So who among us, really, can actually claim to have a meaningful, well-informed, non-confrontational conversation with our teenage or young adult children about drugs in general or meth in particular? In his highly acclaimed book "Marijuana, What's A Parent to Believe?" Dr. Timmen L. Cermak, M.D., writes: "*Family members are the most important people in a preadolescent's life. The very idea of being more tightly connected to someone outside the family than to blood relatives makes no sense to young kids. However, with puberty and the upwelling of sexual energies that are taboo to direct toward other family members, the importance of peers increases dramatically. Suddenly, allegiances and emotional attachments to others outside the home become intense and may seem to become primary. But this generates new problems for teens, who still need to be affiliated closely with someone. Which group of peers should they join? The "visible" group? The nerds? The jocks or the brains? The straights or the stoners? And will they be accepted by the group they desire? While family generally accepts the adolescent unconditionally, acceptance is not assured, nor is it constant and freely given, by peers, who are themselves groping for identity and connection.*" (Page 64) So it becomes inevitable for some that "trying marijuana for the first time is also an act of self-assertion...they are claiming their freedom, and no one can control them. That's a fact." (68-69)

It probably surprises no one that the conversations most parents have with their teens about drugs or alcohol are likely regarded as meaningless “90 second sermons that go in one ear and out the other.”

“90 Second Sermons & Other Public Awareness Campaigns”

We would probably be safe to compare a “90-second sermon” to most “public awareness campaigns.” Too often both do little more than remind audiences “we have a drug problem in America which concerns us.” The danger is they lull sponsors and parents alike into a false sense of believing that they have actually done something about preventing drug use. In all likelihood the opposite is true. Turning again to Clifford Schaeffer’s article from 1994: *What causes drug epidemics among kids? Historically speaking, the biggest single cause of drug epidemics among US children has been anti-drug campaigns. The first example was the huge teen drinking epidemic during alcohol prohibition. Prohibition was passed with a campaign of “Save the Children from Alcohol”. Within five years, teen admissions to hospitals for alcohol problems had skyrocketed. Schools had to cancel dances because so many kids would show up with hip flasks full of whiskey. Children became involved in the bootlegging trade... Alcohol prohibition was repealed with a campaign of “Save the Children From Prohibition.” Likewise, the speed epidemic and the rise of LSD use in the 1960s were both preceded by major publicity campaigns about the dangers of these drugs. As one major study of the subject concluded, “the warning (against drugs) functions as a lure”.*

<http://www.druglibrary.org/Schaffer/LIBRARY/epidemic>

“It’s not about your rights, it’s about your health!” But some public information campaigns have worked and are working. Understanding that a poorly executed drug education campaign was potentially worse than no campaign at all, the strategy employed by *Choose Life or Choose Meth* is patterned after one that was used quite effectively during the early 1990’s by the State of California to de-market tobacco use under Prop 99. During that period of time we learned to avoid the scare tactics that failed in the early anti-drug campaigns and the basic idea, back then was “it’s not about your rights, it’s about your health.” Presenting choices instead of ultimatums about the use of tobacco empowered viewers. In sum, it simply didn’t make sense to use tobacco because it could cause permanent harm including lung cancer, emphysema and impotence. Tobacco use dropped by 27% in California as a result of this campaign.

<http://jhpl.dukejournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/21/3/543>

Waging A War On Ignorance... Following this Prop 99 strategy, and the one used by the present day “Truth” tobacco campaign, *Choose Life or Choose Meth* presents an alternative strategy to the war on drugs and replaces it with: *A War on Ignorance*. This video currently enjoys a 96% approval rating among teen and young adult viewers

“The vision of the Choose Life or Choose Meth Project is to realize healthier communities, safer neighborhoods, stronger families, increased graduation rates, more vibrant economies, and reduced inmate populations by eliminating the impact methamphetamine has on each of these entities.”

probably because it speaks to them as if they are adults who can make responsible choices. It contrasts over 48 positive health education messages against the harm that meth causes. In doing so it generates informed, word-of-mouth advertisers who can de-market meth because they understand that it is a poison. So making smart choices requires no act of surrender on the part of the viewer, it simply doesn’t make sense to use meth. And that is what the conversation with parents would ideally create.

<http://www.chooselifeorchoosemeth.com>

Looking back to the future: How we see the future can make a fundamental difference in what we create for ourselves. With meth, we know ignorance is the problem. But today, we can replace that ignorance with a solid curriculum that leads to healthy choices and end the stream of new cases into our correctional system. *The vision of the Choose Life or Choose Meth Project is to realize healthier communities, safer neighborhoods, stronger families, increased graduation rates, more vibrant economies, and reduced inmate populations by eliminating the impact methamphetamine has on each of these entities.* And that is a radically different vision of the future than the one predicted by Clifford Schaeffer. But then again, our strategies are different. And unlike the War on Drugs, in a War on Ignorance, there are no losers. •

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