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A former Cook County prosecutor urges drug legalization

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By Inge Fryklund August 29, 2014 5:04PM

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It is time to call a halt to the War on Drugs. As LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition) has concluded, the war has become a danger to public health and public safety, destroying lives and wasting billions on law enforcement.

My own views were first shaped by five years as a Cook County assistant state's attorney back in the 1980s. I helped set up the Night Bond Court, and several observations stuck with me. Many arrests were drug-related. We also had a lot of repeat customers, people arrested over and over for minor drug offenses. With a drug record, these defendants had little chance of legitimate employment; a higher-level position in the drug trade was probably the most they could aspire to. Most defendants were black; there were few Hispanics and even fewer whites. While drug use does not seem to vary by race or ethnicity, the weight of the criminal law was coming down most heavily on a vulnerable inner-city population.

Our drug war was destroying communities — reducing employability, breaking up families during incarceration, and sending people back to the drug trade. The cycle of destruction feeds on itself, with gangs killing each other over a few square blocks of turf and children in the line of fire accidentally killed. Others deaths are likely indirect results of the war on drugs — e.g., domestic violence disputes shaped by a culture of violence and hopelessness. Chicago has seen the result in the homicide rates that persist to this day in many neighborhoods.

The single simplest thing we could do to change the dynamic is to legalize drugs. The “L” word is a bit scary. It sounds like a seal of approval. Would millions of people turn to drugs? The best evidence is that they would not. A recent study of states with medical marijuana tracked teen use for the three years prior to and after legalization. There was no change in use. Some drug use is with us right now, and that is probably not going to change, but legality means that violence will be reduced. The day Prohibition of Alcohol was repealed in 1933, Chicagoland beer distributors quit shooting each other or turning to the mafia for contract enforcement services. They took their disputes to the Circuit Court of Cook County. When was the last time Coors Light and Bud Light engaged in a shootout over grocery store shelf space? It is only the drug trade that has to resort to violence.

Legalization would allow regulation of the potency and purity of drugs, reducing the incidence of accidental overdoses. Regulated businesses are unlikely to sell to minors. (Pot shops in Colorado seem super anxious to keep their noses clean.) Legalization would also call a halt to the militarization of police departments. Since 1997, the Defense Department has distributed \$4.3 billion worth of surplus military equipment — tactical vehicles, M16 rifles, grenade launchers — to local law enforcement. Ferguson, Missouri, was one of the recipients. The combination of lethal military grade equipment, an “us-vs-them” mentality on the part of the police department, and a disaffected community is a recipe for disaster.

Let's stop the damage, take drugs out of the hands of cartels and gangs, and spend our tax dollars on treatment and on

addressing the community problems that lead to drug use and lack of employability.

Inge Fryklund is a former assistant Cook County state's attorney and a speaker for Law Enforcement Against Prohibition, a group of law enforcement officers opposed to the war on drugs.

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