

The Washington Post

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Wednesday, July 09, 2003

Victims of the War on Drugs

In 1998 the Drug Enforcement Administration sent its Mobile Enforcement Team into Benton Harbor, Mich., while state troopers patrolled the crime-ridden streets. With 42 arrests, the DEA struck a major blow at the drug ring responsible for some 90 percent of violent crime in the city.

In congressional testimony the following year, the DEA boasted: "After the intervention of law enforcement officers.... Benton Harbor was being brought back to life.... They brought a sense of stability to the area."

This was wishful thinking. Not only has there been no lasting effect on the drug trade, resentment of outside law enforcement in Benton Harbor recently has exploded into riots. Residents of the crime-ridden and depressed city see police as an occupying force.

Outsiders find it hard to believe that residents of dangerous communities -- those most in need of police services -- can be anti-police. Our drug laws create this paradox. I policed ground zero in our "war" on drugs on the streets of Baltimore. Police in such circumstances, myself included, do the best they can. But faced with constant levels of drug-related violence and hostility, one should not expect the model for Officer Friendly.

Benton Harbor is not the first or last anti-police race riot. The pattern is always the same: a poor community ravaged by drugs, a history of real and perceived police misconduct, a racially charged spark, then riots.

Terrance Shurn was Benton Harbor's spark. He died after crashing his motorcycle June 16. He wouldn't stop for police. He might have been running to avoid a drug conviction. His license was suspended. Had I stopped him, I would have searched him, legally. I would have found the small bag of marijuana he was carrying. Suddenly, it's jail and a criminal drug conviction.

Most citizens in and out of our ghettos, including drug users, despise drug dealers. But nobody supports heavy-handed drug enforcement.

Those at the receiving end of our drug policy know it simply doesn't work. People will riot as long as police keep locking them up without anything getting better.

Liberals are correct to note that rioting does not happen in the absence of poverty, poor education and poor policing. Conservatives are right to blame the individual rioters. But both sides miss the central point: The problems that lead to riots stem from the drug trade. Eighty years of failed drug prohibition have destroyed swaths of urban America.

While the damage from heroin and cocaine use is real and severe, prohibition creates an illegal market based on cash, guns and violence. While drug use can destroy an individual, the illegal and violent drug trade destroys whole neighborhoods.

If the war on drugs were winnable, we would already have won it. Drug prohibition criminalizes large segments of the



BY REBECCA COOK---REUTERS

population, even the majority in some areas. Police can't hire from some areas they police because not enough men reach hiring age without a drug conviction.

We need to accept the fact that drug addiction is a personal and medical problem. We need to push violent dealers off the street even if it means tolerating inconspicuous and peaceful indoor drug dealing.

Users don't belong in jail. Drug dealers see themselves as businessmen. Arrest one and another will quickly move to take the market. As long as addicts need to buy, somebody will sell.

How can tolerance lower drug use? We can learn from our already legal recreational drugs.

In 40 years cigarette smoking has decreased by half. This is a great victory against drugs. Public education hammered home the harm and changed our culture's attitudes towards tobacco.

Alcohol prohibition was tried and failed. Few argue that alcohol is an absolute "good." But for the most part people are happy with their localities regulating sales, balancing the rights of individuals with the harm to society. For both tobacco and alcohol, high taxation discourages new users and raises money for education.

We should implement similar policies for drug use. Treat drug abuse as a medical problem. Separate the problems of drug use from the violence of the drug trade. Acknowledge that drugs are bad, but don't frame drug policy as a moral war against evil.

Until we do these things, people in communities such as Benton Harbor will be under siege and sparks will set off riots.

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